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NATURE IN
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NATURE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Studies in the Modern View of Nature

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BY

NORMAN FOERSTER

> "Know, man hath all that Nature hath, but more,
> And in that *more* lie all his hopes of good."
>
> —Arnold

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TO MY MOTHER

NOTE

Most of the essays in this book have already appeared in print (generally in an abridged form): "Bryant" in *The South Atlantic Quarterly;* "Whittier" in *The Nation;* "Emerson" in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America;* parts of "Thoreau" in *The Nation* and *The Dial;* "Lowell" in *The Sewanee Review;* parts of "Whitman" in *The North American Review* and in *Publications of the Modern Language Association;* "Lanier" in *The Nation;* and parts of "Burroughs" in *The New Republic* and *The North American Review.* To the publishers of these periodicals thanks are due for their kind permission to reprint. . . . I am also indebted, and deeply, to Professor Oliver Elton and the late Sir Walter Raleigh, who read certain chapters of the manuscript; and to Professor Irving Babbitt and my colleague, Professor H. M. Dargan, who generously read the whole of it.

N. F.

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INTRODUCTION

A land of promise, America is virtually without a past. Her children need not look far back to the founders of her civilization, a civilization not yet freed, and doubtless never to be freed, from its European prototype. The story of her culture—of her art, her philosophy, her education—remains to this day an account of the transfer to a new world of the culture of modern Europe, modified, it is true, by the omission of an intimate sense of that august tradition which reaches back to the primitive Northern folks and the ancient Greeks and Hebrews, and by the addition of physical circumstances destined to affect profoundly her mind and heart. Elizabethan and Puritan in lineage, America has approached maturity, has lived through her most impressionable years, in that confused period of romanticism, democracy, and science from which the modern world has not yet emerged to clearness and faith.

In the age in which the American nation was adolescent, the distinguishing feature of men's thoughts and feelings—and consequently of their literature—was apparently a new gospel of nature. From Jean Jacques Rousseau to Walt Whitman and his disciples, whatever the cross-currents and back-eddies in the intellectual and emotional stream of the time, the prevailing current seems to have been a fresh enthusiasm for nature—for the natural man's impulses, for "natural rights," for natural science. The classical and Christian emphasis on human and internal standards and ideals, dominant up to the nineteenth century, has given place to an emphasis on standards and ideals sought in the external universe, in nature, and in nature within man. Science has applied itself to the understanding and mastery of nature with astonishing results; philosophy has undertaken to determine in what sense inner and outer are one, until, within our own time, it has been well-nigh absorbed by natural science; and literature, faithfully mirroring the passions of the era, has either become realistic in its representation of natural and human life, or has turned to the outer world for an answer to its emotional cravings—or, often, it has done both simultaneously. Thus, Wordsworth, for instance, the high-priest of nature, would not only picture "the infinite variety of natural appearances which had been unnoticed by the poets of any age or country," but also express something of the ecstatic illumination that he felt flow in upon him from a spirit or presence in nature—

> . . . a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

A new sight, a new insight—these are sought in all the literature from the time of Wordsworth to the present moment.

Nowhere are they more prominent than in the literature of America. With only two or three exceptions, all of our major writers have displayed both a striking curiosity as to the facts of the external world—an intellectual conscience in seeking to know them with exactness—and an ardent emotional devotion to nature because of her beauty or divinity; and this curiosity and this devotion have become so pervasive that, especially in our time, even writers outside the main intellectual and emotional currents of the age—such as contributors to rural newspapers and to college magazines in the most remote sections of the country—reveal the new absorption in nature quite as clearly as the typical poets and essayists of the day, and perhaps more clearly than the great writers of the nineteenth century. It is the purpose of the studies that follow to trace the development of this naturalistic movement in American literature from Bryant to Whitman and the typical essayists of the present century, determining more fully and precisely than has yet been done how much of nature our authors were acquainted with and what place she held in their hearts and thoughts. At the same time, by studying the movement in relation to the classical and Christian traditions which it has more and more supplanted, we may determine in some measure in how far it has enriched man's life and in how far it has tended to imperil his self-knowledge.

Since the movement had its origin in Europe, it will not be necessary to consider in detail its American beginnings; yet it will be worth while, before dealing with Bryant, at least to glance at the work of his predecessors and of his contemporary Cooper.

NATURE IN
AMERICAN LITERATURE

NATURE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

BRYANT

§ 1

Since the early white settlers of America were Englishmen and other Europeans, who brought with them and later imported the culture of the Old World, for a long time the distinction of America, the newness of the New World, was simply nature. To the first settlers that was an uncomfortable fact rather than a stimulation to the artistic imagination, calling for action and not art, the axe and the plow and not the pen and the brush. Later, when the opportunity for art came, European tradition inevitably supplied most of the subjects and methods to artists essentially European and only in the most superficial sense American. Without being insensible to the charms and grandeurs of the American scene, our writers obeyed their hearts as well as convention in turning to the Old World tradition even in their treatment of nature. If for two centuries the lark and the nightingale sing in American poetry, if the American robin is loved to this day largely because he inherits the associations of the robin redbreast, the true explanation is not artistic insincerity but precisely its opposite. Although sound artistic movements are nearly always in part revolutionary, in the main they must be traditional, as Washington Irving, for example, recognized. "My native country," he wrote, even two hundred years after the settlement of Plymouth, "was full of youthful promise; Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age"—and, with the instinct of the classical artist, he turned from a crude promise to achieved treasures. The beauty and sublimity of the natural setting for American civilization he perceived as well as later men; "her mighty lakes, like oceans of liquid silver; her mountains, with their bright aerial tints; her valleys, teeming with wild fertility; her tremendous cataracts, thundering in their solitudes; her boundless plains, waving with spontaneous verdure; her broad deep rivers, rolling in solemn silence to the ocean; her trackless forests, where vegetation puts forth all its magnificence; her skies, kindling with the magic of summer clouds and glorious sunshine;—no, never need an American look beyond his own country for the sublime and beautiful of natural scenery." But his allegiance was to art, not to America. Unmeaning, to him, was the idea of some of the early painters, an idea all but central to the later democratic bard of Mannahatta, that the physical grandeurs of America must be "tallied" by an unique grandeur in art. Since America meant chiefly nature, Irving sought his artistic stimulation in Europe.

Yet even in the time of Irving the impressive American setting was claiming its place in our literature and our painting. The first native school of painting, founded by Durant and Cole and brought to culmination by Inness and Martin, was a landscape school. In the work of Cole, the peculiarities of nature in the New World were first clearly perceived; in the silver-gray canvases of Durant, painted mainly out of doors, they were reproduced more faithfully; in the work of their followers of the Hudson River or White Mountain school, the new tradition of literalism and patriotism was continued; and finally, in the painting of Inness and Homer Martin, the crudities of the "primitives" were minimized through a profounder art, and nature in America was rendered with enthusiasm and distinction.

A similar development, culminating earlier, was taking place in literature.[1] Freneau, in such lyrics as "To a Caty-Did" and "The Wild Honeysuckle," various poets who imitated Thomson's *Seasons,* and Alexander Wilson, the ornithologist, initiated a native tradition of nature poetry, which was at length definitely established, as we shall see presently, by the first great American poet, William Cullen Bryant. In prose, meanwhile, a beginning was made by Crèvecœur in his charming *Letters from an American Farmer,* and culmination attained by a writer of romances, Fenimore Cooper, who convinced the world that the physical grandeur of America was adequately embodied in literature.[2] Aside from Irving, our first literature of considerable absolute value, that of Bryant and Cooper, is therefore in a very real sense the expression of the first distinction of America, her physical self.

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[1] For a detailed account of early American writing on nature see "The Development of the Love of Romantic Scenery in America," by Mary E. Woolley, *American Historical Review,* vol. 3, pp. 56–66, and "Nature in Early American Literature," by Selden L. Whitcomb, *Sewanee Review,* vol. 2, pp. 159–79.

[2] Of foreigners who have previously presented *"une nature et des mœurs tout à fait étrangères à l'Europe,"* the chief is, of course, Chateaubriand. Dreaming of the virgin forest and the

§ 2

This is truer of Cooper than of Bryant because, unlike Bryant, and like the early landscape painters, he is essentially pictorial. Living on the frontier in New York up to the age of thirteen, encompassed with the dangers of life at the verge of civilization, face to face with hundreds of miles of sheer forest stretching westward, developing a robust and manly temperament incapable of serious speculation or unusual spirituality but not devoid of the feeling of romance, he unwittingly absorbed from the settlers, the Indians, and especially the primeval forest, the inspiration and the substance of his Leatherstocking Tales. When he finally utilized this experience, his unreflective genius rarely found itself adequate to the depiction of the subtleties of human nature; but he constantly revealed a mastery of action such as none of the New England-

noble savage, he came to America to behold them with his own eyes. He saw a little of America; imagined more, partly with the aid of books of travel; and in *Atala* gave a description magnificently poetical if also theatrical. A single passage will illustrate:

" . . . je pris sa main dans ma main, et je forçai cette biche altérée d'errer avec moi dans la forêt. La nuit était délicieuse. Le génie des airs secouait sa chevelure bleue, embaumée de la senteur des pins, et l'on respirait la faible odeur d'ambre qu'exhalaient les crocodiles couchés sous les tamarins des fleuves. La lune brillait au milieu d'un azur sans tache, et sa lumière gris-de-perle descendait sur la cime indéterminée des forêts. Aucun bruit ne se faisait entendre, hors je ne sais quelle harmonie lointaine qui régnait dans la profondeur des bois: on eût dit que l'âme de la solitude soupirait dans toute l'étendue du désert."

ers attained—a power not without relation to his life on the frontier—and a faculty for portraying the majesty of nature such as no other American writer has exhibited. Of these two leading elements in his work, action and setting, the latter is the more important because it is unique, and because, while distinct from the drama itself, it tends to swallow up both actors and action, as the silent forest, receiving the proud columns of General Webb's army marching with fife and drum, "at length appeared to swallow up the living mass which had slowly entered its bosom." Certainly it was the domination of the setting that most of all impressed a European reader like Balzac, who bluntly asserted that Cooper's grandeur is "a reflection of the Nature he depicts." In reading this magical prose, he says,

> "You incarnate yourself in the country; it passes into you, or you into it, and you know not how this metamorphosis, the work of genius, has been accomplished; but you feel it impossible to separate the soil, the vegetation, the waters, their expanse, their configuration, from the interests that agitate you. The personages become what they really are, a small matter in this grand scene which your eye measures."

How Cooper achieves his effects is something of a mystery; a clumsy stylist, a prosy poet, he yet contrives to place before us this grand scene—the breathing stillness of the ancient woods, whose oaks and pines, free of underbrush at the base, soar into the upper air; unsullied lakes reflecting the image of fair islands and mountains and the moods of the sky; the laugh of the loon, the tapping of woodpeckers, the sound of waterfalls; at night the calls of whippoorwills and wolves, the black mystery of the forest, the brooding peace as of the centuries, the faint starlight where the water is free of the overshadowing hills. It is all viewed externally, without passion, without perception of detail: a few broad strokes and the picture is created or the feeling conveyed with extraordinary unity and definiteness. Its solemnity is enhanced by the aborigines, as ancient, as noble, as wild as the grand scene itself, by soldiers and white women bringing alien associations of the refinements and artificialities of civilization, and by white hunters and trappers who have renounced civilization and accommodated themselves to the ways of the Indians and the primitive forest. One of these white hunters, the inimitable Natty Bumpo, is a veritable incarnation of this wild and lovely nature, in his green hunting shirt, buckskin leggings, cap of skins, whose "edication has been altogether in the woods; the only book I read, or care about reading," he says in his simple enthusiasm, "is the one which God has opened before all his creatures in the noble forests, broad lakes, rolling rivers, blue skies, and the winds, and tempests, and sunshine, and other glorious marvels of the land! This book I can read, and I find it full of wisdom and knowledge." To Cooper, as to Leatherstocking, nature is never God but merely the work of the "Almighty Creator," a book to be read, a book of wonderful pictures, whose meaning no one can fathom, whose influence, however, is one making for knowledge and wisdom and, in the train of these, peace and happiness.

§ 3

While Cooper found in the scenery of America, rejected by Irving, the material for stirring romances, William Cullen Bryant found in it the material for poetry. He has the same large, free handling of nature, united with a regard for detail absent in the romancer; he has the same feeling for the magnificence of the scene, united with a more penetrating sympathy and more speculative power. No longer an impressive setting merely, nature is now conceived as a profoundly moving symbol of God, speaking, to the devout beholder, a various language.

Bryant's attachment to nature, like Cooper's, was largely the result of his boyhood environment. "I was always from my earliest years," he wrote in his autobiography, "a delighted observer of external nature—the splendors of a winter daybreak over the wide wastes of snow seen from our windows, the glories of the autumn woods, the gloomy approaches of the thunderstorm, and its departure amid sunshine and rainbows, the return of spring, with its flowers, and the first snowfall of winter." Like most other poets of nature, he enjoyed her charms thoughtlessly, and for that reason all the more intensely, in his early years; and although his enjoyment deepened as well as darkened as time went on, he ever retained a wistful recollection of the days when spontaneity was unmixed with introspection. In the remote Berkshire country of his boyhood, where something in him responded eagerly to the beauty and serenity of the venerable yet always youthful forest, the desire to express his delight in words visited him early. In the presence of orchard and meadow, of brook and river, of primeval forests vast and gloomy, of hill upon hill leading toward Greylock and the other mountains, he felt an incitement that he could not deny: mingled with the beauty of nature were "visions of verse and of fame":

> "Each gaze at the glories of earth, sky, and ocean,
> To my kindled emotions was wind over flame."

If he had spent his early years in a thronging city, his poetry, had he written any, would doubtless have been very unlike "Thanatopsis" and "A Forest Hymn." The background of all his verse, in a sense its origin, is the great Pontusac forest. But if nature drew him to poetry, it is equally true that poetry drew him to nature. The poets, he tells us, fostered in him the enjoyment of nature—especially Wordsworth, whose *Lyrical Ballads* caused "a thousand springs . . . to gush up at once in my heart" and changed "the face of nature, of a sudden . . . into a strange freshness and life." It is probable that Wordsworth remained his favorite poet throughout his long life.

At first, political events were the main themes of his verse. As a boy of thirteen the future editor of the *Evening Post* published a satire entitled "The Embargo," a bitter attack on Jefferson and his peace policy. But in the second edition, printed in the next year, he included an ode to the Connecticut River and some curious verses on "Drought." By the time he was seventeen years old, having read the *Lyrical Ballads*, and having rejected his inheritance of the unemotional measures of the eighteenth century, Bryant had already found, in a rather free blank verse, his proper means of expression: the astonishing result was "Thanatopsis," which is a view of nature as well as of death. Of the later poems that are concerned primarily with nature it would be absurd to present a list—such a list would resemble, and scarcely exceed in interest, a table of contents. In the course of a few years he had published "The Yellow Violet," "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," "To a Waterfowl," "Green River," "A Winter Piece," "The West Wind," "A Walk at Sunset," "The Rivulet," "March," and "Summer Wind." And if we turn to the closing years of his life, we find him still writing on "The Path," "The Return of the Birds," "My Autumn Walk," "Among the Trees," and "May Evening." Relatively to the quantity of his verse, Bryant wrote more poems of nature than anyone else in American literature.

Of the qualities of his poems of nature, most readers of Bryant, apparently following Stedman, have emphasized the "elementary" aspect of his themes and of his mood—his interest in earth, air, and water, as distinguished from an interest in insect, bird, and tree; and although something is said of his accuracy in detail, one receives the impression that he tended to avoid detail on account of his preference for the universal. From "Thanatopsis," his most popular poem, one might very well reach this conclusion, since in the entire poem he mentions only the oak—no other tree, and no bird or flower. But as a matter of fact, Bryant, if not often minutely descriptive, is quite as concrete as most American poets, and mentions more species of flowers and trees than any other American poet—more than Lowell or Whittier or even Whitman. Insects alone seemed of slight interest to him, or else he regarded them as alien to the dignity of poesy. Only the bee occurs with any frequency, and even in this case one suspects that the alliterative association with "brooks" and "birds" and "blossoms" had something to do with the matter. Of mammals he introduced into his verse, like Whitman, an assortment that would suffice for a zoölogical garden. The deer, the squirrel, the wolf, or the panther graces almost every page; the deer, indeed, if one may judge by the number of poems in which it appears, was to him a symbol of the great forests that had kindled his youthful imagination. Birds, whose music rather than beauty of color attracted him, he used in his verse more often than any other American poet save Whitman—in all, some thirty species—and he devoted entire poems to the song sparrow, the English sparrow, the bobolink, and a nameless waterfowl: the last of these being the inspiration of his best poem. Of trees and flowers his knowledge, and the use of his knowledge, was still more extensive. "He was a passionate botanist," said one who knew him well. The trees of his poetry number nearly thirty, and many of them—in particular the oak, the beech, the pine, the maple—are used repeatedly, the oak for instance, occurring in some twenty poems. Lastly, the flowers of his poetry, though but a small bouquet compared with those he could name, are about forty-five in number, and his use of them indicates a faithfulness of observation that well-nigh exceeds Thoreau's. Three—the yellow violet, the fringed gentian, and the painted cup—are the themes of separate poems. Of the forty-five species it is rather odd that none, save the violet, reappears more than once or twice; when he wanted a flower, he generally picked a new one—the water-lily, the dandelion, the meadowsweet, and a dozen others blossom only once in the poetical work of over seventy years.

Clearly, though remaining a poet of the elements, of "The earth, the air, the deep," Bryant did not disdain to mention in his poetry the concrete details of nature, to mention them, moreover, both incessantly and accurately.[1] And, we may add, sympathetically. Like other modern poets, he recognized in nature, not only a thing of beauty, but also a precious healing power, which seemed to him to stream into his spirit through the senses. Bryant's genius, after all, was by no means altogether didactic and mortuary; sensuous pleasure, despite the alleged "coldness" of his temperament, is prominent in his relation to external nature. The fact that so little has been said of his sensuousness is to to explained, not by its absence from his life, but by the moral inflexibility that held it in check. The kind of sensuousness that we shall observe in Whitman, and even in Thoreau, we can find no trace of in Bryant. But that his senses did not respond with normal eagerness to the blandishments of nature is refuted by "Green River," the "Inscription," and a dozen other poems. No one, I believe, has pointed out his particular pleasure in the wind, especially the mild touch of the wind in summer. Nine entire poems are devoted to a conscious celebration of the wind: "The West Wind," "Summer Wind," "After a Tempest," "The Hurricane," "The Evening Wind," "The Winds,"

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[1] Yet he was by no means infallible, as Burroughs shows in revealing errors of fact, some of them serious, with respect to the yellow violet, columbine, fringed gentian, bluebird, and bobolink (*Pepacton*, pp. 90–96).

"The Voice of Autumn," "The Wind and Stream," "May Evening"; and in most of his other poems the wind is a prominent theme. "Green River" opens characteristically, "When breezes are soft." More than in anything else, he found the healing power of nature in the wind:

" . . . The sweet breeze
That makes the green leaves dance, shall waft a balm
To thy sick heart."

He meditates on this balm in two entire poems, "The Evening Wind" and "May Evening." Bird song, the music of brooks, "and soft caress of the fresh sylvan air," he writes of his boyhood days, raised his low spirits and invited him to lose himself in day-dreams; and in "Autumn Woods" he exclaims:

"Ah 'twere a lot too blest
Forever in thy colored shades to stray;
Amid the kisses of the soft southwest
To roam and dream for aye."

The sensuousness of such writing may lack the passion and fine excess of the European romanticists of his time, but it is surely pronounced enough to make us modify our conception of Bryant as a "cold" elementary poet. The usual effect of the caress of the wind, it should be added, was not the longing "to dream for aye," but pleasure and refreshment in the "flowing air" regarded as the token of life.

"Oh Life! I breathe thee in the breeze," is almost as typical of his poetry as the view of nature as "the great tomb of man." Poet of death and the grave, he is also a poet of life and of the unending motion of the illimitable air. If anything in nature is endowed by Bryant with spirituality, it is the wind—"heaven's life-breathing wind," "the breath of God."

§ 4

In his accuracy in the details of external nature, Bryant is of the nineteenth century; in his sensuousness, which, though not negligible, lacked the abandon characteristic of latter-day poetry, he is rather of the age of Cowper; in his general attitude toward life and nature, he is still less modern—is, indeed, Puritan.

If Bryant's attachment to nature was in large measure the result of his boyhood environment, so also was his conception of nature and God. In the secluded village of his birth, religion, if not the whole of life, was a most substantial part of it. The rigors of Puritanism had just begun to subside. Dr. Bryant, the poet's father, had been converted, it is true, to the emancipations of Unitarianism, and Bryant himself began to move in that direction early in his life. Yet he had been brought up under the influence of Calvinism, supposing it "to be the accepted belief of the religious world," and had spent many of his impressionable years in the home of his grandfather, Ebenezer Snell, a devout and learned Puritan; with the result that, however overt his subsequent revolt from the harshness of Calvinism, he never passed from its shadow. William A. Bradley, in his admirable study of Bryant, rightly emphasizes the metamorphosed Puritanism that was essential in the poet throughout his life—a Puritanism quite other than that of the Transcendentalists and more striking. It is observable in all his acts and in all his writings; and it is clearly observable in his attitude toward nature.

To the earliest Puritan immigrants, America was often "an horrible Wilderness," an uncouth, shaggy region, which the devil might well have made peculiarly his own. As time went on, and the new land became in some degree home, the alien ruggedness of the country was viewed with more affection; most Puritans, though they did not care to repress their inherited attachment to the gentle lawns, the flowing downs, and pleasant villages of "the best Island in the Universe," were ready enough to extol the virtues of the new England. Yet they could not look upon the primitive wildness of their environment with unvarying composure: a sense of mystery, of awe, now and again stilled their hearts as they traveled in the silent, towering forest. When the peace of midsummer filled the interminable expanse of beech and oak and pine, it brought to those who passed into the woods, we may imagine, a kindred but not unalloyed peace—ever, in the soft air fitfully wandering, in the fragrance of moss and fern and tree, in the white pine boughs swaying over water, there was a suggestion of somewhat inscrutable, that excited while it quieted. These were the works of God, symbolizing his transcendent beauty and at the same time his unimaginable power. They were pleasant to behold, they roused aspiration and pious thought; but they might at any moment awake something that was almost fear—a profound and desolating sense of awe, a sense of the dread omnipotence and otherness of the Hand that shaped them. Never was the thing created regarded for an instant as the creator, never was it supposed that by sympathy one could enter into communion with the creative essence in nature; always God was the father and nature was the child, or, strictly speaking, the material symbol. That this form of dualism did not forbid a noble and poetic entrance into the delights and sublimities of nature is indicated by such a passage as the following in the writings of Jonathan Edwards:

> "So that, when we are delighted with flowers, meadows, and gentle breezes of wind, we may consider that we see only the emanation of the sweet benevolence of Jesus Christ. When we behold the fragrant rose and lily, we see His love and purity. So the green trees and fields, and singing of birds, are the emanation of His infinite joy and benignity. The easiness and naturalness of trees and vines are shadows of His beauty and loveliness. The crystal rivers and murmuring streams are the footsteps of His favor, grace, and beauty. When we behold the light and brightness of the sun, the golden edges of an evening cloud, or the beauteous bow, we behold the adumbrations of His glory and goodness; and in the blue sky, of His mildness and gentleness. There are also many things wherein we may behold His awful majesty: in the sun in his strength, in comets, in thunder, in the hovering thunder-cloud, in rugged rocks, and the brows of mountains."[1]

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[1] Quoted from a manuscript, Allen, *Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 355–56. It will be remembered that when a mere child Edwards retired to the solitude of the forest to pray, and that later many of his highest religious raptures came to him when riding alone in the woods, or when, leaving his horse, he penetrated to the heart of nature; here, thrown back upon himself, he felt his own unspeakable sinfulness and the sweet grace of Christ. Of this spiritual experience nature is the setting, the atmosphere perhaps, but never the substance. "We see the most proper image of the beauty of Christ," he says a little farther on in the manuscript quoted above, "when we see beauty in the human soul."

In some such manner did the Puritans look upon the great natural world about them, and in some such manner did Bryant, though he lived in the age of Wordsworth and Emerson, look upon it. Born of parents both of whom were descended from *Mayflower* ancestors, bred in the parochial seclusion of a village pervaded with the spirit of Puritanism and surrounded by dark forests like those in which Jonathan Edwards had humbled himself and seen visions of holiness, he never outgrew the dominant influences of his early life, never quite assimilated contemporary modes of thought and feeling, never became modern but always remained essentially Puritan. When all has been said of his kinship with the "graveyard school" of the eighteenth century, it is still Puritanism, rather than the sentimentalism of Blair and Kirke White, that dictates the sonorous lines and somber emotion of "Thanatopsis"; if it is "pagan," as is often said, it is so mainly because the boyish mind of the poet was overwhelmed by the universality of death rather than by the omnipotence of the Creator. Puritanism, rather than Wordsworth, makes fundamental contributions to the writing that follows "Thanatopsis." In such a poem as "A Forest Hymn" all the leading influences on Bryant's view of nature are plainly at work. There is the graveyard conception of nature:

> "Lo! all grow old and die—but see again,
> How on the faltering footsteps of decay
> Youth presses . . ."

There is the Puritan and deistic conception of nature as a revelation of the divine, which runs through the entire poem:

"... Grandeur, strength, and grace
Are here to speak of thee."

There is, apparently, Wordsworth's conception of a divine presence that disturbs with the joy of elevated thoughts:

"... Thou art in the soft winds
That run along the summit of these trees
In music; thou art in the cooler breath
That from the inmost darkness of the place
Comes, scarcely felt; the barky trunks, the ground,
The fresh, moist ground, are all instinct with thee."

But is this, after all, "the motion and the spirit" that "rolls through all things"? Is it indeed an echo of the voice of the tranquil, anointed Wordsworth? An echo, yes; but no more. Even when Bryant speaks of an "indwelling Life," in the very next line he turns to his customary "visible token." Although Wordsworth roused a thousand springs in Bryant's heart, giving the familiar Berkshire landscape a new glory, liberating his starved imagination and making him bold to call himself poet, Bryant never repeated, unless in momentary glimpses, the naturalistic mysticism of Wordsworth. Here and there a whole poem suggests the author of "Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower" and of "To the Daisy"; and many poems express, as Wordsworth expressed incomparably, the modern sense of the healing virtue of nature; but only a few lines and passages remind one of the author of "Tintern Abbey," and even in them the resemblance is to the phrasing rather than to the actual meaning. His God is not in the landscape, nor in the creative mind of the poet. Nor is He the absentee landlord of the deists, so remote as to have no important relation with human experience. No one can read carefully "A Forest Hymn" and Bryant's other poems of nature without perceiving that between him and Wordsworth, as between him and the deists, there is a great gulf fixed, without perceiving that, in the main, Bryant walks erect in the faith of his fathers. A paternal God, the resurrection, and the life everlasting, with the Decalogue as a guide for this life, are more or less directly the themes of most of his poetry. Save in his youth, his eyes were fondly fixed on the sapphire gate of heaven, on the

"Dim battlements shining faintly,
And a throng of faces there."

Under the spell of Wordsworth, in the era of New England transcendentalism, he scarcely wavers from the conception of nature as the unspiritual product of the same God that the Mathers and Jonathan Edwards worshipped—

"Father, thy hand
Hath reared these venerable columns, thou
Didst weave this verdant roof. Thou didst look down
Upon the naked earth, and, forthwith, rose
All these fair ranks of trees."

This is the essential Bryant, the belated voice of New England Puritanism, clear and firm as the morning—Puritanism freed from its excessive Hebraizing, and finding, in poetry and nature, an incentive to æsthetic expression. The rapt adoration of the Puritan in his deeper hours, his passionate vision of God and God's ineffable loveliness and magnificence, no poet of the nineteenth century could well have; instead Bryant gazed with joy and awe upon the spectacle of God's work, nature. The Puritan's horrible fear of hell, of the unendurable, unending tortures which sinners (that is, mankind, with a few exceptions) were certain to suffer at the hands of an angry God, this likewise no poet of the nineteenth century could well have; instead, Bryant meditated, with a morbidness that owes more to his forbears than to eighteenth-century sentimentalism, on the "never-ending Flood of Years," the pitiless call of the grave. For the spiritual aspiration of the Puritan divines he substituted an awed regard for nature; for their emphasis on the terrors of hell he substituted the somber certainty of the grave. The substitutions are important, it is true, marking both losses and gains; but they do not involve an essential shift in temper. More distinctly than any other of the greater American poets, Bryant brings into our literature the Puritan spirit.

CHAPTER II

WHITTIER

§ 1

Passing from Bryant to Whittier is like passing from the Old Testament to the New Testament: we are still in the Bible; the authority of the Pilot is still beyond question; the air, if less bracing, more bland and solacing, is essentially the same; the voyaging poet, as before, looks upon the spectacle of nature with the eyes of a supernatural faith. Although the perilous waters of romanticism and of modern science are dimly descried at the horizon, they are never attained—if anything, Bryant, the belated Puritan, sees them more distinctly than Whittier, the Quaker, whose fervid imitation of Christ kept his gaze fixed elsewhere. To the meditative Bryant, nature is ever in the foreground, a challenge to his imagination; to the spiritual Whittier, it is oftenest only background. Yet this contrast quite fails to suggest how Whittier loved his natural background, how he had grown out of its manifold matter and life as a boy on the farm and continued, all his days, to find joy in it. Though he lived in the spirit far more than did Bryant, he was, more than Bryant, more perhaps than any other American poet, a child of the soil.

Brought up on a farm tilled by his ancestors as far back as 1647, Whittier voluntarily spent his life of eighty-three years at Haverhill and the neighboring town of Amesbury. For the most part unhesitatingly, he accepted the religion of his fathers, the poverty of his family, the hard toil of a farm in northeastern Massachusetts, the bad food, his rather frail constitution, the long drives in the one-horse chaise to the meeting-house at Amesbury, where his teeth "could not chatter until thawed out." If there was rigor and confinement, he turned, with a happiness only the deeper, to the beauty and affection that encompassed him and meant for him "home," the dearest if not the highest word he knew; even his highest word, as we shall see, is inseparably linked with the sentiment of home. To Whittier a home was a spiritual entity that had its being within a house surrounded by fields and woods—the natural frame was essential. This frame, in his case, had not a little wild beauty. Lying on a slope in the embrace of Job's Hill, the old homestead faced a brook flowing through bright meadows, with dark hills extending west and south: "as wild and lonely a spot as Carlyle's Craigenputtock," says one biographer. When the wind was right, the boy could hear the distant bells of Haverhill, at other times the muffled boom of an ocean storm beating at the shore a dozen or more miles away. The ocean on one side, the mountains on the other—from the hills about the farm one can see, not only the pale waters of Ipswich Bay, but also the forms of Wachusett and Monadnock and the Deerfield range. Connecting mountains and sea, the Merrimac River flows through southern New Hampshire, imaging, in tranquil reaches, the pines and elms of Haverhill and Amesbury, and passes into the open ocean. The valley of the Merrimac, including parts of the mountains and of the coast north and south, is Whittier's country. All of it he knew and loved, and much of it he described with patient fidelity when he wrote; life itself he sometimes thought of as a voyage down a river, past snag and fall and siren-haunted islet, guided by an Unseen Pilot to a port of peace.

§ 2

In his paper on Robert Dinsmore, Whittier made a characteristic observation concerning rural poetry: "The mere dilettante and the amateur ruralist," he said, "may as well keep their hands off. The prize is not for them. He who would successfully strive for it must be himself what he sings, one who has added to his book-lore the large experiences of an active participation in the rugged toil, the hearty amusements, the trials and pleasures he describes." This is well said, even if it has something of Wordsworth's jealous appropriation of his Cumberland mountains. The rural poet must be sincere and truthful; and Whittier was ever both, thanks to his character no less than to his environment. He was no amateur ruralist, this dark, keen-eyed, somewhat lanky countryman, who had swung axe and flail and wandered barefoot in quest of nuts and berries, who, when Garrison came to call him to the great world, was in the act of crawling under the barn after a stolen hen's nest. He knew farm life as intimately as Burns did, and he had explored the surrounding woods and meadows with an eye more observant, if not more loving, than that of Burns.

Everywhere in his poetry we see the apple orchards of New England, the stone fences with their load of vine, the roads winding past small farms and ponds and glacial lakes, the brooks and placid rivers, the ocean gray in the chill fog or glancing blue under a summer sky. The scenery of a farming country and of the ocean Whittier often combined in a charmingly simple picture:

"The slopes lay green with summer rains,
  The western wind blew fresh and free,
And glimmered down the orchard lanes
  The white surf of the sea."

Deficient as he was in the life of the senses—he was color-blind, had no ear for music, enjoyed dully sensations of touch, odor, and taste—it is not a little surprising to find how carefully he observed and recorded the sights and sounds of the country about the farm under Job's Hill. He had, indeed, something of what he calls "White of Selborne's loving view."

Though he was not the American poet of the sea—Longfellow and Whitman both have a better claim to the title—he wrote abundantly of

"Waves in the sun, the white-winged gleam
Of sea-birds in the slanting beam,
And far-off sails which flit before the south-wind free."

He watched the slow tides in their coming and going, the curved surf following the beach line and leaping upon the gray rocks of the headland, by night the water luminous under the moon, reflecting, in the darkness beneath a bluff, the sudden shine of the lighthouse beacon; he listened to the call of the curlew across the bay, to the voices of children playing in the sand, to the cadence of miniature waves on an Indian summer afternoon, or the crash and hiss of a nor'easter bearing sheets of fine rain; he camped with Fields and Bayard Taylor, on Hampton Beach, behind them marsh, creeks, and somber oaks, before them the sea, the outbound fishing schooners, with sails aslant to the wind, the white and gray birds voyaging hither and thither; in the marshes of Salisbury he beheld the mowers sweeping down the salt hay, off Boar's Head he fished for rock cod, at the Isles of Shoals enjoyed

"The hake-broil on the drift-wood coals;
The chowder on the sand-beach made,
Dipped by the hungry, steaming hot,
With spoons of clam-shell from the pot."

And in all of these things, particularly as he grew older, he found a subtle virtue—"the healing of the sea."

Still more closely did he watch nature in the neighborhood of the homestead above the brook. Insects, indeed, he mentioned sparingly in his poems—save the bees, whose "low hum" sounds dreamily in many of his landscapes—and he seemed to care little for the larger creatures about him, unless we except the squirrel and a number of birds. His birds are nearly thirty in number, and many of them occur several times—the wild goose floating on Kenoza Lake, the blue jay with his foolish scream, the blithe song sparrow by the river's edge. But he had apparently no favorite among the birds, nothing analogous to Lowell's bobolinks and orioles or Gilbert White's swallows, and, we may add, did not observe the ways of birds more attentively than do most countrymen. General names, such as thrush and woodpecker, usually sufficed when he wished to vary his customary bird, beach-bird, sea-fowl, wood-bird, and the like. The possibility that he was unromantic enough actually to prefer these general names is, I think, removed by his evident accuracy in referring to flowers and trees.

About forty flowers blossom in his poetry, and certain of them so often that they had plainly won his esteem. Thus the "trembling harebells" recur five times as often as the hardhack and thistle, both characteristic of the Whittier country; the fragrance of clover and the luxuriant yellow of goldenrod are found frequently; the laurel and asters of the Merrimac banks and the lilies of the quiet ponds are singled out for particular praise; the violet is mentioned four times as often as the daisy, the wild rose eight times as often; and the mayflower, partly on account of its historic association, is the subject of two poems. Trees, however, are still commoner in Whittier's poetry—in all well-nigh thirty species, a number of which recur again and again. Although he was not given to mentioning the precise species—poplar, willow, and the like usually sufficed—he did so on occasion; witness his scarlet-oak and staghorn sumac. And again, whereas he had no favorites among the birds and only a conventional liking for certain flowers, he was apparently very fond of certain trees—the elm, the maple, the birch, the pine. He referred frequently to the elms of the village, wet with rain or gleaming with snow and ice—"a jewelled elm-tree avenue"—and to the fine fringe of elms along the Merrimac. The maple attracted him in all seasons, but especially in spring, when the little flower tassels quiver with life in the soft rain, and in the autumn, when the whole tree is aflame with color. Still oftener did he describe the birch, white of stem, dainty of foliage, a token of the purity of nature; in one of his sea-coast pictures not a birch-spray is "trembling in the still moonshine."

Yet, compared with the pine, these trees occur almost rarely. In something like sixty-five poems the pine is mentioned or described, while the birch, the nearest rival, occurs only fifteen times, the maple a dozen times, the willow three or four times. Among all the birds, flowers, and trees of the Merrimac valley, Whittier bestowed his affection first of all on the oracular pine of Emerson, the "sempiternal" and "elysian" pine of Thoreau's musings. This liking for the pine is perhaps the most striking trait he had in common with the Transcendentalists. Now the sleety wind is roaring through the pines, now the ancient pine laments with him the death of a friend with wordless moan, now he stops to admire "the storm-torn plumes of old pine-forest kings," or the subtle fire of the sunshine among the delicate sprays, or the sea-coast headland bristling with dark green, or the last sun of summer shining "through yon columnar pines"; the mountains stretch away with their massy covering of "eternal pines," and the woodland paths are overhung with "low drooping pine-boughs winter-weighed," and Chocorua is "pine-besung"; in a poem on Burns, the pine is employed as the emblem of our country, elsewhere as an emblem of "the North's keen virtue," contrasted with the languorous beauty of the Southern palm. The characteristics of the pine that he returned to again and again are its tenuous music when the wind touches its strings; its sturdy, steady growth, rarely tainted by decay; and its evergreen quality. The first of these brought an infinity of somberly romantic suggestions, the last two the sense of eternity. The pine retains its foliage and melancholy music when other trees are bared by autumn blasts, and it naturally became for him a symbol of sadness and survival; he, too, mourned when, year after year, friends left him for the land of fronded palms. There is something evanescent and light-hearted, even trivial, in the airy willows and aspens; and there is something "hoary-wise" and permanent in the dark and fragrant pine.

§ 3

Like Bryant, Whittier looked to the outer and unhuman world, not for his religion, but for an ennobling recreation. He was, as I have said, lacking in the life of the senses, and we find in him none of the passionately sensuous delight of Whitman or Richard Jefferies, not even the sensuous pleasure of a normal man like Lowell. Though by no means unaware of the sheer beauty of nature, of its varied sights and sounds, he found in this beauty chiefly a moral value. "Beauty," he says more than once, "in and of itself, is good." Yet this is not the religion of beauty of which Keats and Ruskin were disciples, since the emphasis is reversed. To Keats, if the two are identical, it is because both bring the delights of beauty; to Whittier, because both bring moral strength. Far be it from this Quaker in a Puritan land, whose main ideal was that of the home and who yet never married, to become enraptured with melancholy reverie, with the intoxication of flower meadows, with the physical charm of woman. Instead he addresses Kenoza Lake in this wise:

> "Thy peace rebuke our feverish stir,
>   Thy beauty our deforming strife;
> Thy woods and waters minister
>   The healing of their life."

In "Summer by the Lakeside" there are lines that superficially resemble those of a mystical dreamer losing himself in nature:

> "I read each misty mountain sign,
> I know the voice of wave and pine,
> And I am yours, and ye are mine.
>
> . . . .
>
> "This western wind hath Lethean powers,
> Yon noonday cloud nepenthe showers,
> The lake is white with lotus-flowers!
>
> "Even Duty's voice is faint and low,
> And slumberous Conscience, waking slow,
> Forgets her blotted scroll to show."

But, after all, this is not the mood of him who would merge himself with nature; it is the mood of a man who places too much, rather than too little, stress on orthodox moral values, who would therefore seek the rest of momentary oblivion. The word "even" in the phrase "Even Duty's voice" is significant, and it is worth remarking that Duty and Conscience merely nod. Whittier closes the poem, not with the mystic's yearning for union with the ineffable, but with the resignation of one who is content that an inscrutable Creator should command his destiny—"Unanxious, leaving Him to show."

This love of nature as a healing power, quite distinct from the modern desire of interpenetration with her, is still more clearly expressed in "My Namesake." The poet is telling his namesake what the latter should say, "when asked the reason of thy name." In the course of his description of himself, Whittier says:

"On all his sad or restless moods
  The patient peace of Nature stole;
The quiet of the fields and woods
  Sank deep into his soul.

"He worshipped as his fathers did,
  And kept the faith of childish days,
And, howsoe'er he strayed or slid,
  He loved the good old ways."

As an element of style, Whittier's poetical use of nature consists mainly in more or less labored descriptions, devoid of the witchery of phrase, and in somewhat elaborate similes. He writes conventionally of the analogy of the seasons and life. Although many of his analogies are fairly well concealed, like Bryant he frequently concludes a stretch of description with a frank "So" and a deliberate application of the moral inherent in the description. For example: "So the o'er-wearied pilgrim," "So live the fathers in their sons," "'So,' prayed we, 'when our feet draw near,'" "So, let me hope, the battlestorm that beats," "So from the trodden ways of earth," "So . . . be mine the hazel's grateful part,"

"'So, always baffled, not misled,
We follow where before us runs
The vision of the shining ones.'"

Behind these seemingly surface analogies, however, lies a deeper meaning, an essential part of Whittier's religion. God, he says,

"... Whose presence fills
With liight the spaces of these hills,"

can surely will no harm to His creatures. Nature is fair, and it follows, in the simple but not trivial faith of this Quaker poet, that God is good and will do what is best for all:

"Thy tender love I see,
In radiant hill and woodland dim,
And tinted sunset sea.
For not in mockery dost Thou fill
Our earth with light and grace;
Thou hid'st no dark and cruel will
Behind Thy smiling face!"

So fair, indeed, are nature's forms in this world, he intimates in several poems, that they may well be "heavenly archetypes." The beauty of earth is thus not only a token of immortality, but also a token of the actual appearance of heaven itself. One analogy, however, fails, and in its failure lies the pathos of human life:

"I go the common way of all;
The sunset fires will burn,
The flowers will blow, the river flow,
When I no more return."

Nature, then, meant to Whittier a medicinal power, whose sovereign virtue was the sense of peace and uprightness that it imparted, and it meant further, in his contemplative hours, a source of analogies with the last mysteries of life. Much as he enjoyed the piny woods and vine-fringed river of his home country, he did not seek in nature an answer to his deepest questionings. Herein he was unlike the characteristic nineteenth-century poet; herein he was, in brief, a Quaker. Yet he had nothing of the asceticism of the Middle Ages, whose "proud humilities of sense and posturing of penitence" he repudiated more than once. In the verses entitled "To ———, with a Copy of Woolman's Journal," Whittier states clearly where the soul should go for an answer to its deepest questions. It should go, not to a ritualistic faith, not to the idle, actionless faith of the ascetic, not to "wire-worked" oracles, and not where the maiden of these stanzas goes, to nature, whose rugged features would then be falsely covered with Fancy's veil, but to the still, small voice within:

> " . . . a soul-sufficing answer
> Hath no outward origin;
> More than Nature's many voices
> May be heard within."

The same conclusion is stated thirty years later in "Monadnock from Wachusett"; it is elaborated still more in "Questions of Life," in which he turns from nature, from man's wisdom as recorded in books, from the impotence of grandiose creeds, "To the still witness in my heart"; and it is elaborated again in "The Meeting." In the last-named poem, one of the two speakers advocates worship where the slow hours "Glide soundless over grass and flowers!" The other speaker responds that the pine-laid floor of the meeting-house is not, indeed, better than "breezy hill or sea-sung shore":

"But nature is not solitude:
She crowds us with her thronging wood;
Her many hands reach out to us,
Her many tongues are garrulous;
Perpetual riddles of surprise
She offers to our ears and eyes;
She will not leave our senses still,
But drags them captive at her will."

In such passages as these, Whittier is the first important American writer to point out the perils of the "nature cult," the seduction of the spirit by the senses. In Bryant the misuse of nature was little more than hinted at, when he alluded to holy men who had spent their lives in devotion to God deep in the wilderness, and to holy men

"Who deemed it were not well to pass life thus,"

though it seemed not to occur to him to mention the votaries of Nature herself. He, for his part, would simply retire "often" to the woodland solitudes for the moral refreshment afforded by their majestic calm. Nowhere in Bryant is there the sharp distinction between inward and outward on which Whittier rests his condemnation of the quest of religion in nature, nowhere anything like

"Oh, wisdom which is foolishness!
Why idly seek from outward things
The answer inward silence brings?"

And Whittier, on the basis of this distinction, passes still farther from the worshipers of Nature when he prefers, to the silence of solitary meditation, the confraternal silence of the meeting-house,

"For here the habit of the soul
Feels less the outer world's control;
The strength of mutual purpose pleads
More earnestly our common needs;
And from the silence multiplied
By these still forms on either side,
The world that time and sense have known
Falls off and leaves us God alone."

§ 4

Much as he loved nature, associating it, as Burns did, with the simple joys of home, he was essentially, as Burns was not, a religious poet. In his life as in his poems, God conceived as Love, and the "common needs" of mankind, are always central. What is more, they are always linked. In his humanitarian faith, the Inner Light which is the light of God is essentially the spirit of love—love of the Father and love of all His human children. A mere religion of humanity, a substitution of the love of man for man for the love of man for God, to which the nineteenth century tended both avowedly and disguisedly, would have seemed to Whittier blasphemous; when he asserts that "To worship rightly is to love each other," he implies, of course, the reality of a supernatural being, a God imagined, through the finite imagination of men, as having an abode "above" this world of the senses. Not to a democratic humanitarianism but to this supernatural humanitarianism is owing, then, that "joy of doing good" which Whittier everywhere dwells on—in his many personal poems on unselfish enthusiasts, in his various poems espousing the cause of the oppressed in foreign lands, and in his constant fiery denunciation of negro slavery, together constituting

"A weary work of tongue and pen,
A long, harsh strife with strong-willed men."

So dominant was this reformatory strain in Whittier that he could say, "I set a higher value on my name as appended to the Anti-Slavery Declaration of 1833 [the early date is the point] than on the title-page of any book." The idea of art as an end of living he could not have conceived, much less exemplified; even art as an ideal imitation of nature he translated bluntly into "her mockery, Art." It was quite in keeping with his view of art to assert that Longfellow's "Psalm of Life," which is certainly better morality than literature, contained more than "all the dreams of Shelley, and Keats, and Wordsworth." Yet if his humanitarianism was excessive, it was profoundly sincere. Had he been an European romanticist, he would doubtless have surmounted or disregarded the obstacles to marriage; that felicity he renounced, however, along with the simple and quiet life for which he always inwardly longed. Instead, he dedicated himself to the abolitionist cause, soon finding, as a clerical companion observed, that it is easier to be pious than to be good, but continuing to face death at the hands of mobs, or personal indignities, which seemed to him worse than death. Unselfishly responding to the call of duty, this "silent, shy, peace-loving man," as he characterized himself, never forgot what he had renounced:

"For while he wrought with strenuous will
The work his hands had found to do,
He heard the fitful music still
Of winds that out of dream-land blew."

What was this dreamland? Properly it was not a dreamland at all, but the actual world of external nature and simple humanity frankly viewed "with unanointed eyes." Much as he loved the dewy freshness of the dreamworld of romance, of Spenser and "Arcadian Sidney," with all its magic of beauty and melody, he loved still more the sweetly trivial pleasures of home life in the country: the pines and wild briar, the tinkle of sheep in the pasture, the farmer boy and barefoot girl, the legends whose mysterious shapes haunted the land of his Quaker and Puritan forbears. While he was writing the burning lines of "Massachusetts to Virginia" he would fain have celebrated the pumpkin glowing under the September sun, or the delicately hardy mayflower with its precious memories of the high-sterned ship sailing into Massachusetts Bay. Alone and militant, he dreamed of the affections of the home circle and of the peace of nature. Everywhere in his poems is the sentiment of home—in the memories of "The Barefoot Boy," in the might-have-beens of "Maud Muller," in the recollections of hearth and woman by "The Lumbermen" of Maine, in his two finest idyls, "Snowbound" ("The Cotter's Saturday Night" of the New World) and "The Pennsylvania Pilgrim," the former a picture of felicity in the Quaker homestead of the Puritan land, the latter a picture of the less austere life among the Quakers of the Quaker land. Whittier's ocean pictures are rarely remote and forbidding—we hear everyday children playing in the sand; and his mountain pictures are not complete without "home-life sounds," such as the splash of the bucket in the cool well, the clatter of the pasture bars, the creak of the barnyard gate under "the merry weight of sun-brown children." The life of the spirit was, indeed, the great reality to Whittier; yet the spirit was incarnate, dwelling in an earthly home, which it must needs love.

Lover of home that he was, forbidden the full enjoyment of hearth and nature, Whittier looked forward with the more ardor to a home hereafter, a haven of peace amid the fronded palms of the heavenly islands, where he knew he would rejoin those whom he had loved on earth—"somehow, somewhere meet we must." In an age that was rapidly advancing, or declining, to the view that the longing for personal immortality is "the cry of unfaith," at once egoistic and sensual, Whittier cherished this hope and trust tenderly, and while the poet of his day was seeking to read Earth, he sought to read his heart. If nature is comely and human intercourse sweet, it said, God cannot be cruel; He wills what is best for insect and plant, and He wills what is best for man. Nature herself, our fair home, lost its bloom when he inwardly remembered that

> " . . . beyond this masquerade
> Of shape and color, light and shade,
> And dawn and set, and wax and wane,
> Eternal verities remain."

CHAPTER III

EMERSON

§ I

If it may be said of Emerson's writings that

> "In his every syllable
> Lurketh Nature veritable,"

Thoreau should be given much, perhaps most, of the credit. For Emerson owed as much to Thoreau in respect to the material world as Thoreau owed to him in respect to the world of spirit. Remove the details of material nature from Emerson's essays,[1] and you will rob them of much of their charm and power, since the author would be in perpetual danger of soaring aloft, balloon-fashion, among his "Circles" in worlds unrealized. Remove them from his poems, where the sensuous, the concrete, is vitally necessary, and the poetry itself is gone with them. By a most happy conjunction of events, the very man who perhaps of all his countrymen had most to give Emerson, was his fellow-townsman, his friend, his companion in countless walks to the pine-groves, a valued assistant in editing the *Dial,* the guardian of his hearth while he sojourned abroad, and a sympathetic interpreter and critic of his inner life. Their friendship was not, of course, a free union of personalities, though we must make allowance for the stiffnesses of the Puritan tradition and bear in mind that, if Emerson would as soon think of embracing a tree as putting his arm around Henry, the forbidding Henry could be a charming Piper of Hamelin to the Emerson children,[1] could sing his favorite "Tom Bowling" under the shelter of a rock during a shower in the presence of R. W. E. himself, and, when the mood was right, could dance with something like abandon. For years they wandered together over the Concord hills and meadows, exchanging their learning and their aspirations as freely as Wordsworth and Coleridge in the Somerset days. They were meant to be mates; they complement each other; in them is illustrated that piquant idea in the "American Scholar" that the ancient doctrine "Know Thyself" (which may stand for Emerson) coincides at last with the modern doctrine "Study Nature" (which may stand for Thoreau). In the world of outer nature, Emerson constantly deferred to the "river-God," the "forest seer" at his door. "Thoreau tells me"—what more would you have? He seemed to know everything, as by intuition:

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[1] He thought of calling his chief collection of essays, that of 1841, "Forest Essays."

> "It seemed as if the breezes brought him,
> It seemed as if the sparrows taught him,"

as he says in the familiar stanza in "Woodnotes." The sights of his walks "with Henry" he reports as scrupulously as Henry himself. How he, too, revels in names, handles to things, especially erect, manly Latin names:

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[1] See the gracious memorial written by one of these children, Dr. Edward Emerson: *Henry Thoreau, as Remembered by a Young Friend,* Boston, 1917.

> "We found *Saxifraga Pennsylvanica,* and *Chrysosplenium oppositifolium,* by Everett's spring, and *Stellaria* and *Cerastium* and *Arabis rhomboidea* and *Veronica anagallis*. . . ."

How blissful, even unto an exclamation point, on finding "two Polygalas with checkerberry scent!" How slyly satisfied when the wood-god is found fallible—when they come upon "a tall shrub unknown to Henry." With what scientific ardor the two philosophers examine young oak leaves, comparing the black, the scarlet, and the red, and how importantly the particular philosopher in question concludes that "the penetrating the bark of the first to find the yellow *quercitrum* must be for me the final test." And how docilely he, too, is mystified by that ridiculous "night-warbler" that vexed Thoreau's scientific soul for twelve years; how docilely he, too, commits the unpardonable sin of hearing the myrtle warbler when it is the white-throat that sings. Emerson had, by instinct, nothing at all of the scientist in him; as he remarks, just after a walk with Thoreau to see *Ranunculus abortivus* and *bulbosus* and the rest of his friends, "We never see mosses, lichens, grasses, birds, or insects, which are near us every day, on account of our preoccupied mind." And then he adds what surely is a resounding tribute to his tutor, "When our attention is at last called to them, they seem the only things worth minding."

But he did not mind them long: most of the time he was bound to be preoccupied with an idea or a fancy. When Thoreau one day pointed out to him that a river has a male and a female bank, the pickerel-weed keeping to the female bank, we may be sure that Emerson was soon lost in his inner world of compensation, action and reaction, male and female. When, another day—"the finest day, the high noon of the year"—he went with Thoreau on an excursion in a wagon, he may well have experienced the feeling described in the following passage, in which the compact earth beneath him crumbles and melts away:

> "Nature is the true idealist. When she serves us best, when, on rare days, she speaks to the imagination, we feel that the huge heaven and earth are but a web drawn around us, that the light, skies, and mountains are but the painted vicissitudes of the soul."

The world, in his idealistic philosophy, is "mind precipitated, and the volatile essence is forever escaping again into the state of free thought." In nature, therefore, he in a sense found thought: and wherever thought was to be found, thither Emerson would instinctively make his way. That is the underlying reason for the dominance of nature in his writings—from "little azure-colored *Nature*" onward—and in his mode of life at Concord. But there is another reason on the surface: his pleasure in nature, his "child's love of it." In his first book, after casting every manner of doubt on the reality of the external world, he turns suddenly, remarking that, after all, he has no hostility, only love, for nature. "I expand and live in the warm day," he says, "like corn and melons." Time and again he is to discover himself feeling that the visible universe is but an insubstantial web; time and again, as he listens to the wood-bird, the thought will come that

"When that bird sang, I gave the theme";

yet in the main he will accept joyfully the independent existence of the world about him, act in it as men are wont to do, play in it happily in the spirit of childhood, gather facts about it from Thoreau and others as if the facts were themselves ultimate. He concerned himself always, not only with *natura naturans,* but also with *natura naturata;* and it is with *natura naturata* that we, in the following pages, will mainly concern ourselves. Emerson's philosophy of nature we may perhaps study most fruitfully in his disciple Thoreau, who shared his thought and lived it in practice more fully than Emerson himself. Reserving for the next chapter, then, a consideration of the larger implications in Emerson's attitude toward nature, we shall here attend primarily to the natural influences on his life, the knowledge of the facts of nature revealed in his poetry, and his eager response—the response of a true poet—to the provocation of her loveliness and mystery.

§ 2

From his earliest years, nature was the scene of his life. Though born in Boston, he found himself, in childhood, in "a quiet, open region of gardens and pastures, sunny in winter and shaded in summer," in which the cow sent down from Concord by Dr. Ripley was eminently at home. "There was even a pond, where a beginner might try his first skates; and the salt water was close by, with wharves where he might catch flounders and tom-cod." In the usual games and exploits of boyhood, however, Emerson took virtually no part; even in these earliest years, dwelling as he did "in a higher sphere," this "spiritual-looking boy in blue nankeen" must have looked upon nature in a more or less dualistic manner. At the age of thirteen, on entering college, he went to live in the half-rural Cambridge of 1817. The curriculum meant less to him, apparently, than either his own desultory reading or the fields and woods roundabout. "The boy at college," he says, "apologizes for not learning the tutor's tasks, and tries to learn them; but stronger nature gives him Otway and Massinger to read, or betrays him into a stroll to Mount Auburn, in study hours." Later, he looks back fondly: "Ah, the powers of the Spring, and ah, the voice of the bluebird and the witchcraft of the Mount Auburn dells in those days!"

In 1823, when Mrs. Emerson removed her family to the Canterbury farm-house, Waldo responded eagerly to a fuller greenness and to wider horizons than he had yet known intimately, in this "picturesque region of rocks, hills, and woods." At first, to be sure, he was disappointed. Aunt Mary Emerson, seeing in his life here an opportunity not to be neglected to acquire "high and reverential notions" of nature, "as the temple where God and the mind are to be studied and adored, and where the fiery soul can begin a premature communication with the other world," urged him to utilize his opportunity; but he, still in the period of glad animal pleasures, was of course scarcely able to see into the life of things, and consequently was "grievously disappointed." When, however, his air-castles had vanished, he drew closer to his new sylvan home, and within a few months wrote the delightfully fresh verses celebrating his release from school-teaching in Boston:

"Good-bye, proud world! I'm going home:
. . . .
I am going to my own hearth-stone,
Bosomed in yon green hills alone.
. . . .
And when I am stretched beneath the pines,
Where the evening star so holy shines,
I laugh at the lore and the pride of man,
At the sophist schools and the learned clan;
For what are they all, in their high conceit,
When man in the bush with God may meet?"

He had learned Aunt Mary's lesson very quickly. There, at the threshold of manhood, we have virtually everything that characterizes his poetry of nature: the preference of solitude to society; the self-reliant rejection of traditionalism; the happy confidence in a revelation here and now; the feeling that in nature, rightly studied, he may come to know what spirit is; the very setting itself, with its pines and evening star.

After further wanderings, including extended travel in Europe in quest of representative men, Emerson at length came to anchor in Concord, his ancestral town, his own town if not his birthplace. He had already, at the age of eleven or twelve, spent a year or more there, when Dr. Ripley, living at the Manse, gave shelter to the impoverished Emersons, and with his brothers he had rambled far and wide in the woods and over the hills, dreaming boys' dreams:

"They colored the horizon round;
  Stars flamed and faded as they bade,
All echoes hearkened for their sound,
  They made the woodlands glad or mad."

Now, in 1834, he was once more amid "the quiet fields of my fathers," first at the Manse, then in the house that everybody knows on the Lexington road; and here he lived till his death nearly half a century later. He went to live in the country, he said, because he was a lover of solitude; yet genuine solitude he shunned,[1] as he shunned cities. "Cities give not the human senses room enough. We go out daily and nightly to feed on the horizon, and require so much scope, just as we need water for our bath." He wanted quiet, he wanted nature, but not the wilderness. With less appetite for the wild than Thoreau had, he says bluntly enough: "We may easily hear too much of rural influences. . . . Let us be men instead of woodchucks." Owning a house and barn and two acres (later increased to nine) on the outskirts of a village near Boston, he had the advantage of both society and solitude.

Here he had a chance, no doubt long coveted, to dabble at gardening. As man on the farm rather than farmer, Emerson believed that he should devote himself to the garden for an hour or two daily. Leaving to Mrs. Emerson her favorite tulips and roses, he turned his attention to the vegetables and the fruit trees. To philosophize there was well enough:

"Many things the garden shows,
And pleased I stray
From tree to tree
Watching the white pear-bloom,
Bee-infested quince or plum.
I could walk days, years, away
Till the slow ripening, secular tree

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[1] "Solitude is fearsome and heavy-hearted."

> Had reached its fruiting-time,
> Nor think it long."

That is the verse account. In prose, where we perhaps express our everyday thoughts more sincerely, he could vent his wrath on the earthy, pestering tyrant:

> "With brow bent, with firm intent, the pale scholar leaves his desk to draw a freer breath and get a juster statement of his thought, in the garden-walk. He stoops to pull up a purslain or a dock that is choking the young corn, and finds there are two; close behind the last is a third; he reaches out his hand to a fourth, behind that are four thousand and one. He is heated and untuned, and by and by wakes up from his idiot dream of chickweed and red-root, to remember his morning thought, and to find that with his adamantine purposes he has been duped by a dandelion. . . . This pottering in a few square yards of garden is dispiriting and drivelling."

In part, certainly, Emerson's hostility to the soil was due to his lack of skill. His little son Waldo, following him in the garden, not unnaturally remarked, "Papa, I am afraid you will dig your leg." Had it not been for the deft Thoreau, who aided in the garden, the poultry-yard, and the orchard, the chances are that Emerson would have become even more heated and untuned. For him Thoreau was, in one aspect, Prudence personified, a man of the world in his own limited sphere. In such matters his other good friend, Alcott, the Oversoul personified, was useless: witness, for example, the garden-study that he fashioned for Emerson, "feeling its way up, as it were, dictated at each step by the suggestion of the crooked bough that was used and necessarily often altered." Thoreau helped—driving the nails, and driving them well—not a little distressed at the want of plan. "I feel as if I were nowhere doing nothing," he said. For æsthetic reasons the eaves were made to curve upward, and the roof was lined with moss and sphagnum; so that Mrs. Emerson's humor was to the point when she named it "The Ruin."

Liberation from the concentration of the library and the tyranny of the garden Emerson found in the Walden woods. Writing to his friend Carlyle, he said:

> "I, too, have a new plaything, the best I ever had—a wood-lot. Last Fall I bought a piece of more than forty acres, on the border of . . . Walden Pond. . . . In these May days, when maples, poplars, oaks, birches, walnut, and pine are in their spring glory, I go thither every afternoon, and cut with my hatchet an Indian path through the thicket all along the bold shore, and open the finest pictures.
>
> " . . . At a good distance in from the shore the land rises to a rocky head, perhaps sixty feet above the water. Thereon I think to place a hut; perhaps it will have two stories and be a petty tower, looking out to Monadnoc and other New Hampshire Mountains. There I hope to go with book and pen when good hours come."

His wood-lot had, he said, no price; it was his camel's hump. "When the camel is starving in the desert and can find nothing else, he eats his own hump. I shall keep these woods till everything else is gone." He sang their praises in poem after poem, as in "Woodnotes," "Walden," and "Waldeinsamkeit." [1]

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[1] Dr. Edward Emerson's conjecture, by the way, that the title of this poem was suggested by the resemblance in sound to the word Walden would have more weight if Emerson's name had been Sam Kite.

When he bought his farm, he says, he did not realize what an "indescribable luxury" the Concord River is, "which runs parallel with the village street, and to which every house on that long street has a back-door which leads down through the garden to the river-bank; where a skiff or a dory gives you, all summer, access to enchantments new every day, and, all winter, to miles of ice for the skater." Again and again, in his poems and in his prose, we see this "dark stream which seaward creeps"—truly dark when one stands on its bank, but "gleaming," as he described it, when seen from a neighboring hill. In 1827, several years before he settled in Concord, he wrote what are perhaps his most Wordsworthian verses on "The River":

"The same blue wonder that my infant eye
Admired";

and the poem "Two Rivers," one of his best, owes nearly as much to the palpable Musketaquit as to the World-Soul that flows through all things:

"Musketaquit, a goblin strong,
Of shard and flint makes jewels gay;
They lose their grief who hear his song,
And where he winds is the day of day."

Emerson no doubt had good reason for feeling "imparadised" in Concord. With friends like Thoreau, Alcott, and Channing close at hand, with his comfortable house and lot between Walden Pond and the Concord River, with wide fields and meadows and noble pine groves stretching from his very door to the horizon, he lived indeed a "pleasing contrite wood-life," and could want nothing that occasional travel would not satisfy.

Travel, of course, made him homesick. In Naples, he longs for

"... the fogs
Of close low pine-woods in a river town";

in London he complains that the summer is slipping away from him, "for in London all days and all seasons are alike, and I have not realized one natural day." He must have looked back yearningly to his quiet library and his family, from the West, where, as a lecturer, he traveled strenuously for at least two months through a period of twenty years, in days when travel was hard and cheerless, especially in that new country. Some intimate acquaintance with the wilderness he gained through an Adirondack expedition with Stillman, Agassiz, Lowell, and others; in all, ten woodsmen, or, rather, "ten scholars, wonted to lie warm and soft." "The Adirondacs" is, as the subtitle of the poem indicates, a kind of "Journal" of this expedition. Emerson's awkwardness as a woodsman is duly recorded:

"In sooth, red flannel is a saucy test
Which few can put on with impunity.
What make you, master, fumbling at the oar?
Will you catch crabs?"

Here we see him in another pose:

". . . beneath a lighted jack,
In the boat's bows, a silent night-hunter
Stealing with paddle to the feeding grounds
Of the red deer, to aim at a square mist."

The square mist, however, ran away, and Emerson did not fire. Another type of wilderness he explored curiously, the all but treeless sands of Cape Cod—those "emaciated Orkneys." Most of New England he knew well: Maine and the White Mountains, as well as Cape Cod and the Berkshires. Monadnoc ("Cheshire's haughty hill") he praised in the short poem "Monadnoc from Afar" and the long poem "Monadnoc." "How alive he makes Monadnoc!" Oliver Wendell Holmes exclaims, singling out what is assuredly the chief merit in the latter poem. Comes the spruce clerk from the city:

"I take him up my rugged sides,
Half repentant, scant of breath,

. . . .

I scowl on him with my cloud,
With my north wind chill his blood;
I lame him, clattering down the rocks;
And to live he is in fear.
Then, at last, I let him down
Once more into his dapper town,
To chatter, frightened, to his clan
And forget me if he can."

It needs no extraordinary acumen to discern in these lines a caricature of certain emotions roused by this commanding power in the visitor from the friendly meadows of Concord. Good as a spur are Monadnoc, the Adirondacks, "the Cape," the limitless ocean, but peerless as a dwelling-place is the colonial house by the Walden road:

> "That each should in his house abide,
> Therefore was the world so wide."

Reading, writing, lecturing, walking filled his days precisely as he would have them filled. He walked nearly as habitually, if not so extensively, as Thoreau himself. Comparing himself with others, he remarked, in the divinity school days, a peculiarity in his "strong propensity for strolling," and this propensity he retained (guarding it, as he said, wherever he went) till the end of his long life. In one of his essays he approves the emphasis generally placed on having an object in walking. An object he himself always had; for though he took pleasure in stating with seeming recklessness that he did not count the hours he spent in the woods, he knew that, for him at least, there could be no wiser spending. His object was, in a word, inspiration. On the hills and in the woods he could think more elastically, compose more freely, converse more profitably. In dark gray clothes and soft hat, he walked lightly, erectly, ever listening for the murmuring oracles. Sometimes he carried his notebook, more often he recorded his gleanings after returning. He walked at night; he walked in the winter. How much of his poetry he composed out of doors cannot be determined; his son mentions specifically "May-Day" and "The Two Rivers," and there is every reason to believe that lines and short passages frequently came to him as he walked or as he sat in the woods. Sometimes he found the woods "too full of mosquitoes to offer any hospitality to the Muse"; now and then he evaded such pests by bathing in one of the lakes. Often he met woodsmen, fishermen, cattle-drivers—coarse, strong men whose conversation fascinated him.

Dr. Edward Emerson remembers that on Sunday afternoons he strolled with his children, "from four to eight miles, according to the walking and the flowers we went to see; as, when a rare flower was in bloom, we went to find it, in Becky Stow's Hole, or Ledum Swamp, or Copan, Columbine Rock, or Conantum. Mr. Channing often gave the names to the spots, and showed them to father in their glory; then he would conduct us to see the show, or take us to places he had found beautiful in the course of the week; full of pretty speeches about what we were to see, making it a great mystery." Frequently as they walked he would recite poems, especially ballads, sometimes snatches of his own, " 'crooning' them to bring out their best melody." On week days his companion, if he had one, was generally Thoreau, or the aforementioned "Mr. Channing" —the poet Ellery Channing, "who is a perpetual holiday," and in walking with whom "you shall always see what was never before shown to the eye of man." Channing was at heart a painter rather than a poet—he "always speaks of the landscape as of a painting"—and under another dispensation than the Transcendental might well have become an artist. He must have contributed not a little to the suggestions of the plastic point of view that one finds now and again in both Emerson and Thoreau. In reciprocation Thoreau infected Channing with his scientific instincts. As Emerson says, recording in his *Journals* the results, æsthetic and scientific, of "a walk with Ellery":

"He likes the comic surprise of his botanic information which is so suddenly enlarged. Since he knew Thoreau, he carries a little pocket book, in which he affects to write down the name of each new plant or the first day on which he finds the flower. He admires viburnum and cornel, and despises dooryards with foreign shrubs." [1]

Rarely he walked with Jones Very, poet and mystic of Salem, a kindred spirit to whom he could open his heart, as on a certain April day described with fine magic in the *Journals*:

"The South wind blew and filled with bland and warm light the dry sunny woods. The last year's leaves flew like birds through the air. As I sat on the bank of the Drop, or God's Pond, and saw the amplitude of the little water, what space, what verge, the little scudding fleets of ripples found to scatter and spread from side to side and take so much time to cross the pond, and saw how the water seemed made for the wind, and the wind for the water, dear playfellows for each other—I said to my companion, I declare this world is so beautiful that I can hardly believe it exists."

Still more rarely, no doubt, was Margaret Fuller his companion:

"Last night a walk to the river with Margaret, and saw the moon broken in the water, interrogating, interrogating."

Their talk was of "Tendencies," as Emerson records; and he tells us that "Margaret would beat with the beating heart of Nature." Surely here was a talk worth listening to—this searching, spontaneous interchange between the saintly Emerson and the full-blooded Margaret, while the August moon on the water interrogated their souls.

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[1] Channing, however, has his little fling at Thoreau: "Ellery was witty on the *Biographie Universelle de soi même*,"—the book *Walden*.

§ 3

Wandering thus, almost daily, over the familiar, well-tried paths, oftenest to the shores of Walden Pond, alone or with a companion, or paddling up the river paths to see the world, as it were, with a different perspective, Emerson came to know his natural surroundings almost as well as Thoreau himself—thanks partly to the natural lore that Thoreau exchanged for Emersonian ideas. From the mighty world of eye and ear he chose what seemed especially proper to him, relatively ignoring the rest. What did he choose? What aspects of outer nature roused to lively activity his inner nature?

Not, certainly, the sounds; *his* book *Walden* would not have contained a chapter on "Sounds." "That which others hear," he says, "I see. All the soothing, plaintive, brisk or romantic moods which corresponding melodies awaken in them, I find in the carpet of the wood, in the margin of the pond, in the shade of the hemlock grove, or in the infinite variety and rapid dance of the tree-tops as I hurry along." According to his son, he had a good sense of form, drawing heads for his children's amusement aptly, and enjoying Greek sculpture rather than painting in which color dominates form. It may be so, though in his writing Emerson's sense of form somewhat oddly fails to assert itself, and in nature the only lines he frequently admires are the circles or part-circles, such as the horizon and the rainbow. His son adds, "He had less eye for color"; and here, surely, we must disagree.

Through "the flowing azure air" he saw the world in a radiant, iridescent shimmer. "In the landscape felt the magic of color; the world is all opal, and those ethereal tints the mountains wear have the finest effects of music on us." The sea is "the opaline"; upon the land the divine "million-handed painter" has poured "opal hues and purple dye." The fickleness of nature's coloring is greatly enhanced for him by the chiaroscuro of "the cloud-shadow on the lea," of the "leopard-colored rills," of the infinite changes of the hours:

> ". . . Yonder ragged cliff
> Has thousand faces in a thousand hours."

This fluid harmony of color is composed, as the opal is, of various brilliant colors. Emerson sees them sometimes with startling distinctness, as in this prose account:

> "Is all this beauty to perish? Shall none remake this sun and wind, the sky-blue river, the river-blue sky; the yellow meadow spotted with sacks and sheets of cranberry-pickers; the red bushes; the iron-gray house with just the color of the granite rock";

or this verse account:

> "Through files of flags that gleamed like bayonets,
> Through gold-moth-haunted beds of pickerel-flower,
> Through scented banks of lilies white and gold."

If repetition indicates anything, purple was the color that he saw most or liked most. He writes of "the purple sea," of "the purple landscape," of "the purple mountain," of "the cold and purple morning," of "the purple cloud"—his clouds, in particular, are somewhat monotonously purple. All of his attraction to color is expressed in the journal passage in which he comments on Channing's remark that "as for beauty, I need not look beyond an oar's length for my fill of it."

"I do not know," says Emerson, "whether he used the expression with design or no, but my eye rested on the charming play of light on the water which he was striking with his paddle. I fancied I had never seen such color, such transparency, such eddies; it was the hue of Rhine wines, it was jasper and verd-antique, topaz and chalcedony, it was gold and green and chestnut and hazel in bewitching succession and relief, without cloud or confusion."

If anything, Emerson's eye for color was stronger than his eye for form.

His ear for music was so deficient that he could not recognize with certainty even the commonest airs, and though he attended concerts dutifully, derived little from good music: "It looked to me as if the performers were crazy, and all the audience were making-believe crazy, in order to soothe the lunatics, and keep them amused." Of nature's sounds he enjoyed echoes, boughs buffeting boughs in the wind, and

"... the gasp and moan
Of the ice-imprisoned flood"

when

"Blue Walden rolls its cannonade."

The south wind—"the wizard South"—was his favorite, but less for its touch, perhaps, than for its melody —"the musical, steaming, odorous south wind, which converts all trees to wind-harps." No sounds did he value so much as the eerie voice of the Æolian harp in his west window—see, for example, his poems "The Harp" and "Maiden Speech of the Æolian Harp"— and nature's Æolian harp, the pine-tree.

> "Tie a couple of strings across a board and set it in your window, and you have an instrument which no artist's harp can rival. It needs no instructed ear; if you have sensibility it admits you to sacred interiors; it has the sadness of Nature, yet, at the changes, tones of triumph and festal notes ringing out all measures of loftiness."

Such perceptiveness as he had, Emerson cherished; and his curiosity in large measure made up for his lack of the instinctive perceptiveness of the naturalist. Essentially an idealist, he nevertheless was deeply interested in natural science, in the "law for thing," and took his opportunities very seriously: "The first care of a man settling in the country," he says, "should be to open the face of the earth to himself by a little knowledge of Nature, or a great deal, if he can; of birds, plants, rocks, astronomy." This he did, with the help of Thoreau and Channing. His aims were various. Among them was the satisfaction of the instinctive love we all feel for the concrete world, round which we hover "as moths round a lamp." Among them was also the adjustment of the poet's imagination to the facts of outer nature: "The poet loses himself in imaginations, and for want of accuracy, is a mere fabulist." Accuracy of this kind has been prized, even misprized, by the poets of the nineteenth century; when so wayward a genius as Whitman changes the "calves" of his she-whale to "calf," fidelity to fact may be said to be deified. In Emerson this modern instinct is ever operative. For example:

> "And ever when the happy child
> In May beholds the blooming wild,
> And hears in heaven the bluebird sing."

"In heaven" is precisely right. And here is the chickadee ("titmouse") of this amateur ornithologist—I have italicized the phrases most indicative of his accuracy:

> "Flew near, with soft wing grazed my hand,
> Hopped on the bough, then, *darting low,*
> Prints his small impress on the snow,
> Shows feats of his *gymnastic play,*
> *Head downward, clinging to the spray.*
>
> . . . .
>
> For men mis-hear thy call *in Spring,* . . .
> Crying out of the hazel copse, *Phe-be!*
> And, *in winter, Chic-a-dee-dee!*"

In such passages, moreover, together with fidelity to fact we find a certain charm that gives life and motion to the image, delighting us with an odd, pretty, penetrating truth of vision:

> "When the fungus broad and red
> Lifts its head
> *Like poisoned loaf of elfin bread.*"

> "The cold gray down upon the quinces lieth
> And the poor spinners weave their webs thereon
> *To share the sunshine that so spicy is.*"

"He loved to watch and wake
When *the wing of the south-wind* whipt the lake
And the glassy surface in ripples brake
And fled in pretty frowns away
Like the flitting boreal lights,
Rippling roses in northern nights,
Or like the thrill of Æolian strings
In which the sudden wind-god rings."

In all his writings, it is evident that Emerson kept his eye on the object—what a clear, piercing eye, such passages indicate as well as do his portraits. That he consequently learned "a great deal . . . of birds, plants, rocks, astronomy," can be demonstrated by a glance at his works.

Of astronomy it is true that, though it fascinated him through life, he never attained much tangible knowledge. The stars, those "birds of ether without wings," or "heavenly ships without a sail," or, as he called them collectively at the beginning of his first book, the "City of God," roused his literary interest even in his school days—there is still extant a "theme" on astronomy that was the outcome of an impression received one night as he crossed the spacious Common. Later he read of the lives and achievements of such men as Kepler, Newton, and Herschel, and looked forward to a study of astronomy in his old age. His night walks at Concord were taken mainly with a view to knowing the stars better. It is an objection to astronomy, he says to Channing, "that you light your candle at both ends. After you have got through the day and 'tis necessary you should give attention to the business of sleeping, all hands are called; here come Canopus, Aldebaran, and all stars, and you are to begin again."

And often he did begin again; for, after the dissipating sunlight and the fluid moods that characterize the day, which finally make one doubt one's identity, then "these expressive points, always in their place so immutable" tranquilize us, lead us toward the One in the many.

Everything between the stars and the skyey spaces and the nearest and smallest objects of nature, such as the insects, Emerson regarded with an inquiring spirit. In our day this seems usual enough; but "some of us can recall," with the late T. W. Higginson, "the bewilderment with which his verses on the humble-bee, for instance, were received, where the choice of subject seemed stranger than the words themselves. It was called 'a foolish affectation of the familiar.'" That it is not affectation may be proved, not only by the poem itself, but by the testimony of Burroughs, who says, "Emerson's best natural history poem is the 'Humble-Bee.'" Of the dozen or more insects that one meets in Emerson's poetry, the humble-bee occurs oftenest. The "poor, tooting, creaking cricket" gets in only once; more than once we see the curious firefly:

" . . . harlot flies
Flashed their small fires in air, or held their court
In fairy groves of herds-grass."

A half dozen times at least we see and hear the—

"Burly, dozing humble-bee . . .
. . . .
Zigzag steerer, desert cheerer,
Let me chase thy waving lines;
Keep me nearer, me thy hearer,
Singing over shrubs and vines."

This "yellow-breeched philosopher," it will be remembered, teaches him to see only what is fair, sip only what is sweet, but at bottom he prizes him, rather, as a symbol of the summertide.

Passing by Emerson's miscellaneous animals, from salamanders to behemoths, we come to the birds, some twoscore of them—a very large number for a single volume of poems. His bardic love of the birds Emerson expressed directly:

"Beloved of children, bards, and Spring,
O birds, your perfect virtues bring,
Your song, your forms, your rhythmic flight,
Your manners for the heart's delight,
Nestle in hedge, or barn, or roof,
Here weave your chamber weather-proof,
Forgive our harms, and condescend
To man, as to a lubber friend,
And, generous, teach his awkward race
Courage and probity and grace!"

Like Lowell at Elmwood, he was a happy observer of the birds from his study window: near which, in a balsam, he could see the ground-sparrow, oriole, cedar-bird, crossbill, yellowbird, goldfinch, catbird, robin, and "particolored warbler." Going to the woods not far away, he heard the spiritual thrushes (hermit thrushes, apparently), transcribing their song with skill: *"Ah Willie Willie; He Willio, willio,"* and in the meadows behind his house the chorusing red-winged blackbirds. The admirably accurate line—

"The redwing flutes his *o-ka-lee,"*

is probably only in part Emerson's.

But Emerson's bird—truly an Emersonian bird, as Burroughs says—is the chickadee. Lowell's rich, warm, vivacious songsters, the oriole and bobolink, are not for him; his is the stout-hearted wintry chickadee, the companion of his walks in all seasons and weathers:

> " . . . piped a tiny voice hard by,
> Gay and polite, a cheerful cry,
> *Chic-chic-a-dee-dee!* saucy note
> Out of sound heart and merry throat,
> As if it said, 'Good day, good sir!
> Fine afternoon, old passenger!
> Happy to meet you in these places,
> Where January brings few faces,'"

—lines so sympathetically accurate that no one who knows them and the bird can fail to see as in life the little animated spirit in gray with the shining, black, bead-like eyes. This poem on "The Titmouse" is Emerson's final expression of affection for his valiant little companion, from whom he draws the sympathetic, but otherwise somewhat inadequate conclusion that—

> "The reason of all cowardice
> Is that men are overgrown,
> And, to be valiant, must come down
> To the titmouse dimension."

The flowers of Emerson's poetry are astonishingly varied. After drawing up a list of them[1] one is inclined to regard this lover of the abstract as the foremost botanist in American poetry. Perhaps he is; but it must be said at once that the great majority of his flowers are merely mentioned, without indication that he was on familiar and first-hand terms with them. Few, besides, are mentioned more than once, and those mentioned oftenest—the lily, the violet, and the rose—are as characteristic of village gardens as of wild nature. The rose easily outdistances all competitors, being used over thirty times, while clover occurs only five times, the tulip four, and goldenrod once. Why Emerson had recourse to the rose so often is not altogether clear. It is not a matter of rhyme, although, as a monosyllable, the word is more serviceable than the name of many another Concord flower, such as the pickerel-weed (or pontederia) that everywhere borders the dark river with its lovely blue. Partly, no doubt, it is a matter of convention, the rose being one of the first flowers that come to mind, especially, it seems, when we are writing verse. Mainly, however, he selected the rose because he preferred it: both the splendor and labyrinthine perfection of the cultivated rose, and the shy beauty of the wood rose blossoming unseen save for his admiring eyes. In writing a poem on the rhodora, he addresses his forest friend with unintentional condescension as a "rival of the rose." Elsewhere he chooses the rose as a symbol of beauty; and, again, he asserts that it speaks all languages to youth; and, once more, tells us that Saadi,

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[1] Violet, rose, rhodora, laurel, lily, water-lily, cowslip, gentian, aster, flag, pickerel-weed, bilberry, daffodil, succory, columbine, agrimony, clover, catchfly, adder's tongue, blackberry, orchis, linnæa, hyson, wall-flower, rue, cinquefoil, gill, vervain, blue vetch, trillium, hawkweed, sassafras, milkweed, Indian pipe, sundew, pulse, wild grape, lespedeza, tulip, lilac, azalea, mallow, whip-scirpus, polygonum, hypnum, hydnum, harebell, barberry,

anemone, wild tea, wild pea, elder, coreopsis, liatris, peppermint, sweet fern, mint, panax, sarsaparilla, vanilla, hellebore, checkerberry, polygala, benzoin, mouse-ear, wintergreen, goldenrod, bulrush. (A few of these may duplicate each other; it is not always clear what species Emerson meant.)

who is Emerson, faring divinely, drinks the wind and eats roses.

"To know the trees is, as Spenser says of the ash, 'for nothing ill,'" Emerson writes in his essay on Resources. He knew enough of them to give emphasis to a score of species in his poems, the commonest ones oftenest; though the elm, with its feminine graces, is mentioned but once while the sturdy oak is mentioned twenty-three times, nearly as often as his beloved pine.

To Emerson, as to Thoreau, the white pine is the genius of the North, an untamable old Norse wood-god, hoary, ancient, wise in all things, communicating vitality to both body and mind of the chaste, unsentimental worshiper, and instilling, now and again, through murmuring harp-strings, through cathedral columns illuminated by the western sun as by stained glass, an indeterminate hint, a whisper of ultimate being, that fills the votary with a divine frenzy, or an ineffable serenity: a hint incalculable and a memory priceless, that add to his daily thought and all his outward life a sense of lift, a consecration, a spiritual experience. This is no exaggeration; whatever Emerson may have thought of the actual pine before him, he did not question what happened within his own nature when he walked in his pine grove at Walden, and there was abandon enough in his Puritan blood to make him ascribe the state of being to the possible outer cause—at least, in his verse:

> "'Heed the old oracles,
> Ponder my spells;
> Song wakes in my pinnacles
> When the wind swells.

Soundeth the prophetic wind,
The shadows shake on the rock behind,
And the countless leaves of the pine are strings
Tuned to the lay the wood-god sings.
    Hearken! Hearken!
If thou wouldst know the mystic song
Chanted when the sphere was young.
Aloft, abroad, the pæan swells;
O wise man! hear'st thou half it tells?' "

It was to hear the *other half* that Emerson tramped daily to his oracular pines. In his poems he tried to express part of that other half, as in "Woodnotes," especially "II," which is saturated with the incense of his sacred groves. Nowhere, in any literature, unless in Thoreau's writings, do we find this same wild-sweet fragrance, feel this stimulating sense of the North so sharply. It is at once ancient and modern—this sense of an inscrutable, wild old nature penetrated with the modern affection; it is also Puritan, in its depth of spiritual energy, its sense of awe, and its emphasis on purity; it is American, too, in its buoyancy, for though Emerson's oracle can speak, as he says, all languages—Italian, English, German, aye, can address the "Fin and Lap and swart Malay"—it speaks with an unmistakable American accent.

§ 4

Such enchantments, says Emerson, are medicinal, sobering and healing us. We perceive with never-ending astonishment the accommodation of the life of man to the life of nature: rejoicing at the refreshment given us by the cold water from the spring, at the relief afforded by the wood fire when we are chilled. These elementary physical satisfactions win for nature our gratitude, our trust, our sense of a friendship that knows no beginning and will know no end. Above these satisfactions, however, are the subtler health-giving properties of nature when her equanimity steadies our nerves, heals our wounded or balked spirits, restores us to ourselves. They lose their grief who hear *her* song:

> " . . . A woodland walk,
> A quest of river-grapes, a mocking thrush,
> A wild rose, or rock-loving columbine,
> Salve my worst wounds."

She will not tolerate our petty woes, and belittles even our larger woes, bathing us in an atmosphere that cools and purifies and elevates. "When we come out of the caucus, or the bank, or the Abolition-convention, or the Temperance-meeting, or the Transcendental club into the fields and woods, she says to us, 'So hot? my little Sir.' " If Emerson were living in these still more troubled times, we may be sure he would seek, and find, healing and new energy, and therefore new light, in his woodland walks.

Many nineteenth-century poets have been vividly conscious of this healing power of nature. It has been their inevitable haven of refuge from the fevers and alarms of these latter days; other centuries, more healthy because more assured and more at home in the universe, have said little about it. Even Emerson, far more assured than most of his contemporaries, finding within his own spiritual nature the support that others sought without, felt the need keenly. But he perceived higher effects also. "There are all degrees of natural influence," he remarks, "from these quarantine powers of nature, up to her dearest and gravest ministrations to the imagination and the soul."

In the attainment of these higher effects, we have but one instrument—love. Lacking that, our knowledge is vain, our conquest of nature is barren, we are but strangers in her presence:

"The injured elements say, 'Not in us';
And night and day, ocean and continent,
Fire, plant, and mineral say, 'Not in us';
And haughtily return us stare for stare."

Or, as he says in another poem,

"To read the sense the woods impart
You must bring the throbbing heart."

Then you shall find them full of solicitation, then you shall know that

"The gods talk in the breath of the woods,
They talk in the shaken pine,
And fill the long reach of the old seashore
With dialogue divine."

In the main inarticulate, their talk is not unmeaning. Nature and man nod to each other, like old, old friends. When the man approaches her rightly, her countenance lights up with benignant recognition. Crossing the bare common, while night is descending and snow puddles shine rather dismally here and there, Emerson experiences a flooding exhilaration, and a gladness that passes understanding dwells with him for a time. At such unpredictable moments Emerson felt convinced that nature is moored to the soul.

Always he found that these moments are unpredictable; like Thoreau he soon discovered that nature will not yield herself to man's whim:

> "Casualty and Surprise
> Are the apples of her eyes."

He speaks of "a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction" that brands nature as a coquette. In his *Journals* he records that, returning to Concord from Waltham one night with Elizabeth Hoar, his companion said, in Lincoln woods, "that the woods always looked as if they waited whilst you passed by—waited for you to be gone"; and in his essay on History, in which Elizabeth becomes "a lady with whom I was riding in the forest," he elaborates the idea, comparing it with what he regards as its incarnation, so to speak, in fairy lore—the fairies breaking off their dance on the approach of man. Like Thoreau, with whom he must have discussed his experience, Emerson was obliged to describe his "oracular woods" as "inscrutable and mute." He accepted the paradox with a good grace. Feeling at times a sense of derision in nature, which he would at first resent, he concluded nevertheless that a single look at the solemn face of nature "lays all petulance at rest, and soothes us to wiser convictions. To the intelligent, nature converts itself into a vast promise, and will not be rashly explained." And he goes on to say that the wise man will not seek to identify himself with the work, but rather with the Workman. In the order of nature, that workman is the World-Soul; in the order of man, the Over-Soul. Let man seek the soul, then, not through the medium of nature, whose most articulate messages are only dubious hints, but immediately within himself, renouncing for the moment the life that links man with nature, and letting the higher self, the self that is not self, emancipate itself in ecstatic union with universal spirit. Let him remember, likewise, that the mystic way "points to virtue as to

'The golden key
Which opes the palace of eternity.'"

If the author of "Comus" never wavered, as Emerson did, in his attitude toward the natural universe; if his conception of virtue and the problem of evil, despite its theologic trappings, was more profound, he was not more assured than Emerson himself, true descendant of the Puritans, of "the eternal distinction between the soul and the world" and the ineluctable authority of the moral sentiment.

CHAPTER IV

THOREAU

I. Heritage

§ 1

Henry David Thoreau, foremost among American authors who deal with nature, remains to this day something of a mystery. Although he has had more interpreters than any of our other writers on nature, his complex personality has eluded an ever gathering host of sentimental disciples, whom he would have been the first to spurn,[1] and nearly all his ingenious critics from Lowell and Stevenson to those of his centenary in 1917. He has been regarded as an American Diogenes and a rural Barnum; as a narrow Puritan, as a rebel against Puritanism, as a German-Puritan romanticist; as a sentimentalist; as a poet-naturalist; as a hermit worshiping Nature; as an anarchistic dreamer; as a loafer, as a poser, as a prig and skulker; as a cynic, as a stoic, as an epicurean. Where, amid these bewildering and often equally plausible interpretations, are we to find what he himself called his "true center," if indeed he has one? Obviously, the answer should lie within the twenty volumes of his collected writings; in part, however, it should be revealed by an examination of the influences that were most important in making him what he was.

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[1] "I like better the surliness with which the woodchopper speaks of his woods, handling them as indifferently as his axe, than the mealy-mouthed enthusiasm of the lover of nature." (*Journal*, March 13, 1841.)

English, Scotch, and French in ancestry, he was born of a Concord merchant, John Thoreau—one of Carlyle's sincere, silent fathers of genius, a simple little man, who, in his manufacture of pencils and plumbago, was more intent on excellence than on pecuniary gain—and of Cynthia Dunbar, handsome and spirited, "one of the most unceasing talkers ever seen in Concord," whom her staid community was inclined not altogether to approve. Like her son, she encountered the rebukes of the Puritan code, as on the occasion of a visit that she made at the age of seventy: "Perhaps you noticed, Mrs. Thoreau," said Miss Mary Emerson, the redoubtable aunt of the future sage of Concord, "that I closed my eyes during your call. I did so because I did not wish to look on the ribbons you are wearing, so unsuitable for a child of God and a person of your years." Not a little of Thoreau is discernible in his nimble-minded mother and quiet, incorruptible father, and in their other children, who are classified as either "clear Dunbar" or "clear Thoreau." His love of nature seems to have been adumbrated in his mother; certainly it was evoked very early, since he tells of the keen impression produced on his imagination, when he was only four or five years old, by the sight of Walden's fair waters and woods, which, he says, "for a long time made the drapery of my dreams." Early, too, came the tendency to reverie and the love of solitude, although for some years he lived, like Wordsworth, mainly the life of glad animal movements, wandering over the countryside, to woods, lakes, and rivers—hunting, fishing, berry-picking, boating, swimming. Early, likewise, he must have gone into the houses of farmers, as he always liked to do in later years. "There was the old Kettell place," for example, "where twenty-five years ago I played horse in the paths of a thick wood and roasted apples and potatoes in an old pigeon-place and gathered fruit at the pie-apple tree." Always he wanted something active; if only to seek the river to gaze at a canal-boat, a rare bird of passage in Concord, swimming quietly along from a strange land to a strange land, or to watch the Indians, who every year came to sell beads and baskets, and pitched their tents, like the red men of old, in the meadows of the town.

Then there came a time, as in the life of Wordsworth, when a deeper being in him woke to consciousness, a time when the animal activity of early boyhood gave place, not as yet to the brooding reflection of maturity, but to an intoxicated sense of expansion and exaltation. No experiences of manhood, he asserts in a memorable passage in the *Journal,* are comparable with this new rapture:

"My life was ecstasy. In youth, before I lost any of my senses, I can remember that I was all alive, and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction; both its weariness and its refreshment were sweet to me. This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains. To have such sweet impressions made on us, such ecstasies begotten of the breezes! I can remember how I was astonished. . . . The morning and the evening were sweet to me, and I led a life aloof from the society of men. I wondered if a mortal

> had ever known what I knew. I looked in books for some recognition of a kindred experience, . . . for it had been possible to read books and to associate with men on other grounds. The maker of me was improving me. . . . For years I marched as to a music in comparison with which the military music of the streets is noise and discord. I was daily intoxicated."

In this aloofness from the dull life of men, in this passionate quest of sensation and beauty, there is a new spirit in the air, something for which we may find many parallels in the literature of the romantic renaissance, but none, strictly speaking, in the experience of Cooper or Bryant or Whittier.

§ 2

In books, meanwhile, Thoreau was "associating with men on other grounds" than the raptures of youth in contact with nature; and this habit grew until, at Harvard College, he paid little heed to the curriculum, and embarked upon a long voyage of unchartered reading that profoundly influenced his outlook on nature and on human life. He became, says his friend the poet Channing, a "Latin and Greek scholar, with good knowledge of French, and some acquaintance with Italian, Spanish, and German"; and in English literature he read from Chaucer to Carlyle, most sparingly in the eighteenth century and the novel, most devotedly in the Elizabethan period and the early seventeenth century. After leaving college, moreover, he maintained the habit of reading, not only in English but also in Greek and other foreign literatures, adding, in time, many books of local history—Puritan annals, histories of New England towns, books on the Indians—and the religious literature of the Orient.[1] Of the various departments of his reading, none was more influential in the formation of his mind and character than his intimate study of the classics. Despite his insistent comment on Greek and Latin writers, despite his translations from classical literature and his paper on Persius in the *Dial,* little significance has been attached to this aspect of Thoreau's intellectual and spiritual life. Yet Thoreau without his classical background would simply not have been Thoreau. Homer was, to him, by all odds the greatest of poets. He was the literary presiding genius at Walden: "I kept Homer's *Iliad* on my table through the summer." The book *Walden* is full of echoes of the *Iliad,* usually in figurative applications. Homer he found bracing as morning air, and fresh and dewy as the lake water.

> "It is enough," he says, "if Homer but say the sun sets. He is as serene as nature, and we can hardly detect the enthusiasm of the bard. It is as if nature spoke. [What more could he, a lover of nature, say?] He presents to us the simplest pictures of human life, so the child itself can understand them, and the man must not think twice to appreciate his naturalness." "There are few books," he adds, "which are fit to be remembered in our wisest hours, but the *Iliad* is brightest in the serenest days."

In addition to Homer, the classical authors of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers,* were Anacreon, Aristotle, Hesiod, Jamblichus,

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[1] In "The Intellectual Heritage of Thoreau," *The Texas Review,* vol. II, no. 3, pp. 192–212, I have given a detailed analysis of Thoreau's reading. A more general account, in Mark Van

Ovid, Persius, Pindar, Plutarch, Pythagoras, Simonides, Sophocles, Varro, and Virgil. The ancient classics, he insists in *Walden,* must be read in the original. While Emerson genially advises the use of translations, and declares he would as soon swim across the Charles River when going to Boston as read his books in the original language when translations exist, Thoreau propounds with more than Emersonian oracularness, "It is remarkable that no transcript of them has ever been made into any modern tongue, unless our civilization itself may be regarded as such a transcript." No doubt both of these assertions suffer from the Transcendental superlative; but aside from the probability that Thoreau's is the wiser, his is also, more than Emerson's, the utterance of one who loved and venerated the classics, and who had a fair understanding of the grand style and the antique symmetry. The classics went far toward making Thoreau what he was, as his disciples of our day too readily forget; they affected favorably, not only his literary art, but also his ethical standards and consequently his relation to nature.

Of the literary precursors of New England Transcendentalism,[1] those who seem most to have interested him were Goethe, Wordsworth, and Carlyle. From Goethe, however, he received little directly; by the time Carlyle's fervid worship of him, becoming Emerson's dutiful study, had passed to Thoreau, it

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Doren's *Henry David Thoreau: A Critical Study,* which appeared almost simultaneously, reaches substantially the same conclusions.

[1] The best short definition of this movement is still that of J. E. Cabot in *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* I, 248: "that remarkable outburst of Romanticism on Puritan ground."

had lost all its heat. From Wordsworth, on the other hand, the favorite poet of the Transcendentalists, he seems to have derived a great deal, by way of reinforcement if not initial impulse. To Carlyle his direct indebtedness is still harder to measure, for although he read him attentively, and wrote a long essay on "Thomas Carlyle and His Works," one is inclined, on the whole, to the conclusion that the essentials of Carlyle's gospel reached him through Emerson in their many walks and talks at Concord. More important, surely, than any of these precursors is the imponderable influence of the atmosphere of the Transcendental "Newness," and most especially that atmosphere as it emanated from the shining leader of the movement, his friend Emerson.

Fourteen years younger than Emerson, not yet graduated from Harvard when *Nature* was published, he found himself, after his return to his native town, impelled by currents of thought and feeling which he, unlike Emerson, had had no part in creating. The long hard way from orthodoxy to an emancipated devotion to the moral sentiment in all its naked beauty Emerson may be said to have traveled for his young friend, who reached the goal without having to fight his way to it. Thoreau was never ordained, never endured periods of sharp questioning (though, as he says, faith ever keeps doubts in her pay), never went to the hills for a spiritual struggle, never resigned a pastorate, never was the occasion of widespread scandal; all this he experienced, in the main, vicariously, almost without a pang. He was not denied the advantage of the experience; he received the benefit without the labor—in a word, he inherited Transcendentalism. It is a curious world to us to-day, this world of Transcendentalism, whose strength is not our strength, nor its illusions our illusions: remote now seems the saintly Emerson, leaving his company of idealists in the library in order to confer with the woodman, with the confession, "We must attend to these things as if they were real"; or his friend Alcott, latter-day Plato and Pythagoras, not averse to starving family and adherents at Fruitlands in the quest of a spiritual mode of life; or Margaret Fuller, self-appointed Goethe in petticoats—"rich in friends, rich in experience, rich in culture"—holding her attenuated conversations on Greek mythology at twenty dollars for ten sessions. To us of the twentieth century, the century of the greatest of wars and, it may be, of revolutions, it is a charming dream-world, pretty and ideal, like the world of the pastoral, and it serves to refresh weary minds and weary souls. But to conceive it only thus is to misconceive it, for to those who lived in it it was intensely real—a time when the drowse of tradition suddenly snapped and real life began, a time when horizons lifted and drew back and spread new visions to the view of enraptured men, a time when the infinite seemed about to incorporate itself in the finite as never before, a time of reform as well as of self-culture, when men leaned on their souls as did the Puritans of old, and passionately strove to make reason and the will of God prevail.

While Emerson, though the chief figure in this spiritual, intellectual, and social movement, rose above it and attained a certain universality, Thoreau may be regarded as a typical Transcendentalist, affected by all its aspirations, reacting against those he did not espouse, and exemplifying more fully than anyone else its search for Truth in external nature. An American scholar after Emerson's own definition, with perfect self-trust devoting himself to the study of nature, books, and action, measuring all his gains with his own rule and seeking to make them his own by not merely thinking but living them, he followed his chosen course with a deliberation all but fanatical. It led him, as he conceived, away from men to the sphinx-like nature that men had too long neglected. Nature, rightly read, was the key to all mysteries; and, loving her, attuned to her harmonies, clear-eyed in the study of her flowing lineaments, he bravely took the knowledge of her for his province.

II. Naturalist

§ 1

For the field observations of a student of nature Thoreau was admirably endowed. "There was a wonderful fitness," said Emerson, "of body and mind." He had in high degree a species of dexterity not uncommon in the Yankee:

> "He could pace sixteen rods more accurately than another man could measure them with rod and chain. He could find his path in the woods at night, he said, better by his feet than his eyes. He could estimate the measure of a tree very well by his eyes; he could estimate the weight of a calf or a pig, like a dealer. From a box containing a bushel or more of loose pencils, he could take up with his hands fast enough just a dozen pencils at every grasp."

Versatile-minded and nimble-fingered Yankee that he was, he could perform adequately, even excellently, well-nigh any task that presented itself: could survey for his neighbors, do their gardening and carpentering, lecture on slavery or the succession of forest trees, heave manure out of a pen, teach school, make pencils, write books, brick up a fireplace. "One day a man came from the east edge of the town and said that he wanted to get me to brick up a fireplace, etc., etc., for him. I told him that I was not a mason, but he knew that I had built my own house entirely and would not take no for an answer. So I went." There seemed to be nothing he could not do.

In part, his deftness was owing to the perfection of his senses—a perfection assiduously fostered, negatively by abstinence from bad habits, positively by incessant use. This active life of the senses is of obvious advantage to the field naturalist. Ever since Emerson made the remark that his friend seemed to possess more than the usual five senses, we have heard a good deal about his strange power, sympathetic or hypnotic, that caused snakes to coil themselves round his legs, fish to swim into his open palm, and woodchucks to allow themselves to be pulled from their holes by the tail. He understood the relation between sensuous vigor and subtlety and the life of a naturalist: "The true man of science," he wrote in the *Journal*, "will know nature better by his finer organization; he will smell, taste, see, hear, feel, better than other men." Accurate perception in the metaphysical as well as the physical sphere he believed to be dependent on a fit body. The whole duty of man is to make to oneself a perfect body, a fit companion for the soul, since the bodily senses are channels through which we may receive ineffable messages—"subservient still to moral purposes, auxiliar to divine." This relation between body and soul he was almost incessantly conscious of; certainly he never cultivated body for the sake of body, and, being a good New Englander, had no erotic strain. Nothing was more foreign to his nature than the sensuality of a certain type of vigorous masculinity to be found in all ages, notably in the Renaissance, when poet and painter, as well as philosopher, had ground for saying that "not all the snows of Caucasus could avail to allay the fires within me." Driven to choose between body and soul, Thoreau would have had no hesitation: "I must confess there is nothing so strange to me as my own body," he wrote in his *Journal*. "I love any other piece of nature, almost, better." That is his view of body as body, but body as minister of the divine he could not value too highly, and, if not of the Renaissance, he was equally not of the Middle Ages. Without health, he suggests more than once, there is nothing: not the health of the farmer, who is merely tough, whose health is an insensibility to all influence, but the health of the true naturalist or poet, which is the very reverse of the farmer's, being a sensibility to the finest influences. Thoreau would, therefore, keep his senses alert, keenly responsive, as in this *Journal* entry: "My body is all sentient. As I go here or there, I am tickled by this or that I come in contact with, as if I touched the wires of a battery."

He was indeed all sentient. Other poets of nature have not been so fortunate: whereas Whittier's eyes were color-blind and Wordsworth's nose was "an idle promontory projecting into a desert air," Thoreau's senses were all extraordinarily developed. He trained his sight from boyhood onward until his eye, as Emerson puts it, was microscopic. He had a delicate perception of form, of line, of light and shade. Color was a treat to him, according to Channing; his sensitiveness, in this regard, was as sharp as that of a modern artist, and his delight as bounding. Touch, too, meant a great deal to him. The buffeting of the winter wind, the lambent pressure of summer breezes, produced in him a kind of ecstasy. Outdoor bathing he deemed not only "an undescribed luxury," but also a spiritual ablution. While he lived on the shores of Walden Pond, he bathed regularly in the morning; and even when in the village, on at least one occasion he crept out of the house at 1:30 A.M. to bathe by moonlight! "To feel the wind blow on your body, the water flow on you and lave you," has something of the accent of passion, if not the abandon, of Whitman's "The souse upon me of my lover the sea, as I lie willing and naked." As for taste, he tasted everything, having what Channing quaintly terms an "edible religion." Sandcherries he tasted "out of compliment to nature." The white froth of pitch pines, he discovers, "has no taste." An apple on Nawshawtuct Hill has an appropriately curious flavor—"a peculiarly pleasant bitter tang, not perceived till it is three-quarters tasted. It remains on the tongue. As you eat it, it smells exactly like a squash-bug. It is a sort of triumph to eat and relish it." In such matters Thoreau could be counted on to triumph.

Even more adventurous and inspiriting was his sense of smell. "How much excited we are," he exclaims, "by a great many particular fragrances!" Thoreau's writings contain a great many particular fragrances—hickory buds, sassafras, new leaves, decaying fungi, early corn, butter-and-eggs, lycopus ("my smelling-bottle"). He had the habit, he tells us, of smelling of every plant he plucked. He could identify odors by night, despite the volatile and mixing effect of the air currents, and detect the fragrance of the wild apple in the thick woods, or "many rods off beyond the bridge." Walking by the river, he inhales, from the black waves, a fresh and meadowy odor "which is a little exciting. It is like the fragrance of tea to an old tea-drinker." He reaches the conclusion that the sense of smell is more "oracular" and "trustworthy" than that of sight.

"We are as much refreshed by sounds as by sights, or scents, or flavors," he wrote in his *Journal.* As much refreshed, and more. "I drink in a wonderful health, a cordial, in sound." One is not surprised, therefore, to find him devoting many pages in his *Journal* and in the *Week* (especially near the close of "Monday") and a whole chapter in *Walden* to "Sounds." Every sound was a joy to him, a spontaneous assertion of health, of "*sound*ness." "A slight sound at evening lifts me up by the ears, and makes life seem inexpressibly serene and grand. It may be in Uranus, or it may be in the shutter." Are not all good things cheap? He even lay awake by night thinking of a dog's barking he had heard, "bathing my being again in those waves of sound." As one would expect, he was as fervidly devoted to music as any romanticist; he could go about the world, he says like the romantic vagabond, listening for strains of music. He tells us that he was much indebted to a neighbor who now and then played an accordion, though, to be sure, the kind neighbor was only a learner. On hearing the hand organ of an Italian boy at his door, he records: "these delicious harmonies tear me to pieces," and declares that all Vienna could not serve him better: which may be, even if one cannot accept his pretty dictum that in proportion as a man has a poor ear for music, he must go far for it and pay much. He was always charmed with the assured tones of a music box, which he celebrated in a *Journal* rhapsody (January 8, 1842). Believing as he did in simplicity, he did not purchase a music box, but borrowed Hawthorne's, and later he received one as a gift from a friend in Cambridge, which, he says with becoming modesty, was "a very good one."

But there was an outdoor instrument that he valued perhaps even more highly, the telegraph wires vibrating tremulously in the wind—this was his Æolian harp. Again and again he sets down his experience in the *Journal*. Always the melody is serene, always it spells Greece; each strain or intonation, he remarks somewhere, may be given the name of a Greek bard—often Mimnermus, often Menander. One September day, as he was entering the Deep Cut, he caught the melody of his Æolian harp.

> "I instantly sat down," he records, at the base of the pole, and "attended to the communication. It merely said: 'Bear in mind, Child, and never for an instant forget, that there are higher planes, infinitely higher planes, of life than this thou art now traveling on. Know that the goal is distant, and is upward, and is worthy all your life's efforts to attain to.' And then it ceased, and though I sat some minutes longer I heard nothing more."

Thoreau proceeds, like a true romanticist, to compare the human soul with the wire, played on by the divine breath.[1] One other outdoor sound, a purely natural one, thrilled him quite as much—the song of the wood thrush (apparently confused with the hermit thrush), which he deemed "more thoroughly genial" to his nature than any other, touching a depth in him reached by no other bird:

> "The strains of the Æolian harp and of the wood thrush are the truest and loftiest preachers that I know now left on this earth. . . . They intoxicate, they charm us. Where was that strain mixed into which this world was dropped but as a lump of sugar to sweeten the draught? I would be drunk, drunk, drunk, dead drunk to this world with it forever."

One thinks of Keats's stanza beginning "O, for a draught of vintage!" and closing "That I might drink, and leave this world unseen."

Certainly Thoreau's perfection of the senses was not suffered to languish through disuse. "He was," said Emerson, "a good swimmer, runner, skater, boatman, and could probably outwalk most countrymen in a day's journey." Walking was his chief physical activity, and he apparently regarded himself as excelling in the art: *"Ambulator nascitur,"* he says, *"non fit."* With eyes commonly lowered, hands clasped behind or kept close at his sides—in a fist, as if he were ready for action at any moment—he could maintain his long, loose stride about as mechanically as the tick-tock of a pedometer; though, to be sure, he was not so much of a long-distance walker as what he liked to term a saunterer. His excursion, generally in the afternoon, was three or four hours long, often longer: a habit that he persisted in all his days, unless he was ill—to-day to Conantum, to-morrow to Annursnac, next day to Great Meadows, then to Pine Hill, or Walden, or Emerson's Cliff, or White Pond, or Fair Haven Hill, north and south and east and west, until he knew most of his natural surroundings as a squirrel knows its cage, and could choose a particular tree or flower, miles off, as a destination. He liked to wade through swamps, shoes in hand, and to flounder through snow, "sometimes up to my middle," to the tops of the highest hills. He often sang as he walked, or as he paddled up the river in December. His soft hat was his botany box. On occasion he carried a spade to dig out mice. He was ready to respond to any impulse: as when, on seeing a fox, "Yielding to the instinct of the chase, I tossed my head aloft and bounded away, snuffing the air like a fox-hound"; or perchance he pursued him on his skates: "Occasionally he sat on his haunches and barked at me like a young wolf." He knew the ponds and the rivers as he knew the land. "When I come to the river, I take off my clothes and carry them over, then bathe and wash off the mud and continue my walk. I would fain take rivers in my walk endwise." He was fond of boating. That week on the Concord and Merrimac is symbolical of how many days up and down the river near Concord, often at

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[1] Cf. the quotation from *Quintus Fixlein* in Carlyle's essay on Richter, which Thoreau doubtless knew: "Then began the Æolian Harp of the Creation to tremble and to sound, blown on from above; and my immortal Soul was a string in that Harp."

Fairhaven Bay, in the dazzle of sunlight and in the shimmer of moonbeams. He used a sail, by preference, that pulled "like an ox." The river plants and birds he watched intently from season to season—though so late as 1859, when he was conceivably old enough to know better, he was capable of mistaking a great blue heron, first for his good mild friend Channing, then for "some maiden in a bathing-dress."

The natural consequence of these daily wanderings, continued year after year, was that Thoreau became the veritable *genius loci* of Concord. He tells us that he traveled a great deal in Concord. Concord, he wrote in a letter, is his old coat, his morning robe and study gown, his working dress and suit of ceremony, and last his nightgown. "Cleave to the simplest ever. Home—home—home." When a friend proposed that he leave Concord to teach, he replied, "I am engaged to Concord and my own private pursuits by ten thousand ties, and it would be suicide to rend them." When another of his friends was living for a time in Cambridge, Thoreau sympathized with him, remarking that he would love his native hills the better for being separated from them. A trip on the Connecticut River meant to Thoreau mainly an opportunity "to get some hints from September on the Connecticut to help me understand that season on the Concord." At Staten Island for a few months, he could not realize that it was the roar of the ocean that he heard, "and not the wind in Walden woods. . . . Give me time enough, and I may like it. All my inner man heretofore has been a Concord impression; and here come these Sandy Hook and Coney Island breakers to meet and modify the former." He was indeed, as he was clear-sighted enough to see, "like the man who, when forbidden to tread on English ground, carried Scottish ground in his boots," for "I carry Concord ground in my boots and in my hat."

Thoreau was assuredly drenched in the essence of Concord, and it is small wonder that he almost resented the alien breakers of Staten Island. His passionate devotion to Concord, similar to Lowell's attachment to Elmwood, differed from Lowell's in that Thoreau was unable to absent himself from his "Rome," as he liked to call it, for more than a few months; indeed, unlike Lowell, he held it unwise to jeopardize his soul on foreign strands, to cultivate a taste for wine or brandy and thus lose his love of water. What he sought to demonstrate is that El Dorado, if it is anywhere, is where one lives—"America is here or nowhere." This he made impressively plausible. But he also demonstrated that a man may, by exclusive devotion (not merely exclusive residence) to one scene, even when the infinities are contemplated thence, become narrow, provincial: and this might very well have been taken for granted. While Thoreau was staying at Staten Island, he received, through Emerson, some sage advice from Ellery Channing, who insisted that he "ought not to see Concord these ten years . . . ought to grind up fifty Concords in his mill." The impression of narrowness that even a sympathetic reader gets in reading Thoreau is surely in some measure the result of his fanatical love of Concord and his sense of being adrift when he left his native village. Concord was not only his chamber of joys; it was also his cell.

§ 2

There was every reason why, with his keen, sensuous perception, his zealous and incessant observation of the facts of nature, and his intensive study of a single, small district, Thoreau might have become one of the foremost field naturalists of modern science. He chose to be something else, however, something, one is tempted to add, more deeply valuable to man. He was not, essentially, a scientist, but a poet, or transcendentalist, or philosopher, or moralist, what you will. And yet he had a good deal of the scientist in him.

Not to mention his addiction to statistics, which, as he himself said, is an American trait, consider how, year after year, he recorded in his *Journal* the weather conditions, the temperature of ponds and rivers and wells—a veritable thermometric orgy, for instance, in *Journal* XIII: 387-95—and how in his later years he persisted in measuring snowfalls, counting the rings of tree-stumps—inviting his own death in the process—analyzing bird-nests, making up lists of birds and plants, etc., etc. "To Walden," he reports, "to get its temperature": as if he were a physician visiting a patient. His *Journal* is a collection of concrete nouns, names of objects. Any observation at length deserved recording; so that one is not surprised at his taking the trouble, in an 1861 entry, when the nation was about to plunge into civil war, to note that the sound produced by a stick of wood burning in the stove was curiously like the peeping of hylodes. He wanted to include the details of nature, it seemed to him, because he loved "to remember every creature that was at this *club.*" That is surely the right word; "Nature's club gossip" will serve to label a good deal of the *Journal.* He liked the scientific names; they were a "treat" to him, possessing a flavor beyond the title of an emperor. Though he hated museums—"dead nature collected by dead men"—he was a diligent field naturalist, of his own rather odd kind, peeping and botanizing inveterately. He was all eyes and ears and nose, as he took leisurely rambles over his companionable hills and along the lovely reaches of his Mincius; and if a summer rain drove him to shelter beneath a tree, he yet employed himself "happily and profitably there prying with microscopic eye into the crevices of the bark or the leaves of the fungi at my feet." Botany was, on the whole, his favorite science. While still in college, he began to use Bigelow's *Plants of Boston and Vicinity.* At that time he learned the names of many plants, "but without using any system, and forgot them soon." About the time of the Fugitive Slave Law, however, he began to attend, or to use his own more Transcendental phrasing, "found myself attending to plants with more method, looking out the name of each one and remembering it." Since only the first of the fourteen volumes of the *Journal* deals with the period before 1850, Thoreau's more methodic study of botany, which began about that time, tends to dominate the whole *Journal.* Yet it is true, as he reports, that he never studied botany "systematically," even the most natural method being, indeed, too artificial for him.

But although the scientific temper of the age to a large extent directed his moods and activities, Thoreau was clearly enough not a skilled naturalist. So many years of work and so little accomplished! It almost seems to one who turns the pages of the latter part of the *Journal* that he decided not to live but to know; and yet he never knew. Even White of Selborne, gentleman and curate in black breeches and silver-buckled shoes, was a better field naturalist than this Yankee in corduroys pulling woodchucks by the tail. Despite his keenness of sense, he did not see the object as it really is, he cannot even be said to have kept his eye on the object: his eye wavered, made a slight blur, and the vision passed into the form of a mental image through the refracting medium of his personality. Though hampered by living in an age when popular and semi-scientific manuals hardly existed—much less abounded, or superabounded, as they do now—he had no excuse, scientifically speaking, for many of the blunders he committed. A student of birds from his earliest days, he yet used no field glass of any kind till 1854, when he was nearly forty years old; and when, in that year, he at length purchased a glass, it was a spyglass, suitable for the study of shore birds, not of the field and woodland birds that predominated at Concord. This curious sin, first of omission, then of commission, unpardonable in a naturalist, is to be explained partly by Thoreau's dislike of encumbrances of all kinds, and partly by his poetic, rather than scientific, interest in nature. His actual mistakes in the field were many and serious. In 1852, for instance, he was still capable of asking himself, regarding the downy woodpecker, "Do we see him in the winter?"—a bird that had been his daily companion on the winter walks of a score of years! The rose-breasted grosbeak, a handsome and conspicuous if somewhat evasive bird, he should have seen in village or woodland at least annually: yet he failed to make its acquaintance till 1853, after which year he saw it often enough. The "night warbler," so named by Thoreau, was perhaps the chief bogy of his life. For twelve years he observed this feathered specter—usually darting skyward from the woods in a brief ecstasy of song—without being able to lay hold of the mystery; it was his Blue Flower, and Emerson was right in regarding him lucky in his failure to reduce the mystery to sober fact. Had he known that it was *Sieurus aurocapillus,* he would have been little the wiser, and certainly none the happier.

But one need not go out of one's way to catalogue the mistakes of Thoreau the scientist. The publication of the *Journal* simply made emphatic what was sufficiently patent before, that, despite all his show of science, all the parade of Latin names and technical terms, all the reading of temperatures, and measurements, and countings, and records without end, Thoreau was not a scientist, was not even an unusually accurate and thorough observer. Any schoolboy with the same advantages—spyglass, books, and a love of nature—could in five years equal, nay excel, Thoreau's total knowledge of birds, if such a boy were essentially scientific in spirit rather than poetic.

To what end, then, all this scrupulous observation? Thoreau himself had grave misgivings, which he recorded at intervals in his *Journal.* The first clear suggestion of doubt occurs in the second volume; his habit of walking by night, he says, makes him question the advantages brought by the pouring light of day, for though he can see small objects more distinctly by day, he is not more enlightened. About a month later he regards with suspicion the habit of close observation, and heretically advises himself, "Be impressed without making a minute of it." Another month and he is ready to say, "I fear that the character of my knowledge is from year to year becoming more distinct and scientific; that, in exchange for views as wide as heaven's cope, I am being narrowed down to the field of the microscope"; and a few days later, after again contrasting the general with the particular, he speaks to himself in this wise: "You must walk sometimes perfectly free, not prying nor inquisitive, not bent upon seeing things. Throw away a whole day for a single expansion, a single inspiration of air." His concern increases as time goes on, and again and again he unburdens his heart, now with something like mystification, or resignation, now with heroic determination to lead a less observant life. The difficulty increases as his curiosity extends to small things, such as fungi, for will he not presently stoop so low that he will find himself "classifying carbuncles and ulcers"? Yet, after all, one object is as bad as another, and "it is as bad to *study* stars and clouds as flowers and stones. . . . When I have found myself ever looking down and confining my gaze to the flowers, I have thought it might be as well to get into the habit of observing the clouds as a corrective; but no! that study would be just as bad." There was even a sense of distraction: "I have the habit of attention to such excess that my senses get no rest, but suffer from a constant strain. Be not preoccupied with looking. Go not to the object, let it come to you." The "constant strain" compels him to admit that he has "almost a slight, dry headache as the result of all this observing." This looking *at* things will not do; I must look *through* and *beyond* nature. I must approach the objects of nature as if they were totally strange, for what is commonly termed knowledge is vain. "If you would make acquaintance with the ferns you must forget your botany. . . . Not a single scientific name or distinction is the least to the purpose."

The most interesting of these entries, perhaps, is that under the date of November 8, 1851, in which Thoreau tells of Ellery Channing's infelicitous efforts to set down notes in the field:

> "In our walks C. takes out his notebook sometimes and tries to write as I do, but all in vain. He soon puts it up again, or contents himself with scrawling some sketch of the landscape. Observing me still scribbling, he will say that he confines himself to the ideal, purely ideal remarks; he leaves the facts to me. Sometimes, too, he will say a little petulantly, '*I* am universal; I have nothing to do with the particular and definite."

Certainly a charmingly typical bit of Transcendental dialogue! Taking as a text "he leaves the facts to me," Thoreau then enters in his *Journal* an apology for his attention to facts, to the particular and the definite: he, too, would fain set down something besides facts—facts should be only the frame to his pictures. Now, whoever reads the fourteen volumes of Thoreau's *Journal*—if anyone is so untrue to his proper "genius"—cannot fail to note, first, the enormous amount of fact as compared with the amount of comment (the picture insignificant in the ponderous frame), and, secondly, the constant increase in the proportion of fact to comment as the *Journal* proceeds. Well might Channing leave the facts to Thoreau! Open at random any of the later volumes, and you will be reasonably sure to meet such a passage as this:

> "Amelanchier bare. Viburnum nudum half fallen or more; when wet and in shade, a light crimson. Hardhack, in low ground, where it has not withered too soon, inclines to a very light scarlet. Sweet-gale is not fallen, but a *very dull* yellowish and scarlet. You see in woods many black (?) oak sprouts."

Or perhaps this:

> "Started up two (probably) *Totanus solitarius* (?), (possibly small yellow-legs ???). They utter a faint yellow-leg note, rather than peetweet note, *viz. phe, phe, pheet pheet pheet.* Are not shy; stand still [on] or beside a tussock to be looked at. Have peculiarly long, slender, curving wings. Fly like a peetweet, but are considerably larger and apparently uniformly dark-brown above. The belly and vent bright white; breast (upper part) grayish-brown. When they flew from me saw considerable white, apparently on tail-coverts or sides of tail. Watched one still within three rods, with glass. There was a little speckling of whitish perhaps amid the brown above. I think they were too small for the lesser yellow-legs.
>
> "*Eleocharis palustris,* say three or four days.
>
> "Critchicrotches some two or three days; now tender to eat."

That is clearly the writing, not of a literary artist, but of an amateur scientist. Thoreau did not observe as the born scientist does, and yet he could not help observing. He gives us crude fact. It is true that he cherished a notion, now and then, that mere facts and dates, by some mystical process of transcendence, "communicate more than we suspect," that with the knowledge of the name somehow one wins a distincter knowledge of the thing—the thing, indeed, becoming more "poetic." Good Dr. Johnson would have labeled that bosh, which it no doubt is, and which Thoreau himself suspected it to be, if one may judge by the tone of apology that usually underlies his assertion. It was not Thoreau, but Whitman, who genuinely believed in this notion, as his catalogues indicate; he was no less than hypnotized by fact. In theory at least, Thoreau renounced fact as fact, in favor of "thought," or "sentiment," or "serene vision," as the medieval Christian renounced nature in favor of soul, matter in favor of mind. He persistently contrasted the scientist and the poet, allying himself always with the latter. Asked what science he was chiefly interested in, he replied: "I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot." Science, though it enriches the understanding, takes one but a little way. A scientific account of a sunset leads nowhere, for, in restricting itself to the region of the understanding, it really insults the imagination: "What sort of science is that which enriches the understanding, but robs the imagination? not merely robs Peter to pay Paul, but takes from Peter more than it ever gives to Paul?" What is wanted is not analysis of fact, but insight into the truth which fact symbolizes; it is what nature suggests and is the symbol of, he says, that he cares for. Suppose that I am looking at ferns, for example: "If it were required to know the position of the fruit-dots or the character of the indusium, nothing could be easier than to ascertain it; but if it is required that you be affected by ferns, that they amount to anything, signify anything, to you, that they be another sacred scripture and revelation to you, helping to redeem your life, this end is not so surely accomplished." Verily, it is not! How much of Thoreau's life was devoted to an almost aimless and worthless examination of fruit-dots and indusium! His complaint that he could not buy a blank book in which to write his "thoughts," because "they are commonly ruled for dollars and cents," was not altogether justified, for he did not sufficiently record thoughts—what he apparently needed was a blank book ruled for genera and species. Though he understood the need of interpretation of nature, of emphasis on man's relation to the outer world, he did not succeed in throwing off the incubus of fact, and even his entries of confession and resolution in his *Journal* are immediately followed by a return to the old ways. Thus, on the day after his sermon on the text "Be not preoccupied with looking," he smugly records the weather conditions and sets down tentatively, as the name of a plant on Emerson's muck-heap in the Turnpike, *Amaranthus hypochondriacus!* And the entry following the attack on fruit-dots and indusium does little more than state, somewhat elliptically, "My wings and tail are apparently the pigeon hawk's."

III. Natural Philosopher

§ 1

Taking nature as his province, Thoreau studied her faithfully, acquainting himself with her multitudinous facts, her exact rules and laws, her endless diversity and loveliness of form and movement, till he was prone to forget that knowledge of the part was but a means to knowledge of the whole. Yet inwardly he knew and remembered that to attain the true end, to penetrate to the reality beneath the show, he must stir the deeper currents of his own being, rouse himself out of that somnambulism which, according to Carlyle, is what we please to call life. How could he hope to read rightly the holy book of nature if he brought to it nothing better than the unreal light of the dreamworld in which the ordinary man lives without knowing it—that ordinary man of whom Plato says, "dreaming and slumbering in this life, before he will awake here he arrives at the world below, and has his final quietus"?[1] He determined to wake himself before it was too late, to follow reality to the bitter or the sweet end:

> "Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a *point d'appui*, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might find a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a

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[1] The Platonism of Thoreau, such as it is, seems to have come to him mainly by way of Emerson. The *Dialogues*, he says, "lie on the next shelf, and yet I never read them"; and Channing remarks, "I never knew him to say a good word for Plato." Though one may sympathize with Thoreau's aversion to metaphysics, one must regret his indifference to Plato and Aristotle, who might have offset, if he had known them better, his tendency to absorption in nature.

gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time. If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business."

He made it his business to be alive or wide awake, and in *Walden* he made it his business to wake others, "to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up." The millions of men, he found, are sufficiently awake for physical labor, only one in a million for intellectual labor, and alas! only one in an hundred millions for a poetic life. The men that one meets are so many oysters, fungi, squashes:

> "I raised last summer a squash which weighed 123½ pounds. . . . I would just as lief know what it thinks about God as what most men think, or are said to think. . . . My man, perhaps, when I have put such a question to him, opes his eyes for a moment, essays in vain to think, like a rusty firelock out of order, then calls for a plate of that same squash to eat and goes to sleep, as it is called—and that is no great distance to go, surely!"

Habit and custom have staled the world for such a man; he is all but buried under them, is, indeed, lucky if the crown of his head yet remains above ground.

An easy remedy for this death-in-life Thoreau found, with Wordsworth and the other poetic moralists of the

Renascence of Wonder, in the sense of wonder: "He loved to wonder," says Channing in an unpublished journal, "and the more usual the matter is, the more he wondered." "Could we for a moment," says Thoreau himself, "drop this by-play, and simply wonder, without reference or inference!" Putting aside the meddling intellect, the mind deploying futilely in the region of the understanding, the so-called virtues that are really not moral because they are stagnant, the so-called idealism that looks for something better than our possessions, let us realize that "Here or nowhere is our heaven," that "The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it." Who, having ears, would hear this poem must first of all wonder; thus shall he attain that immediacy for which all men long. Again and again Thoreau repeats to himself that he must live in the present, since that only is truly living. "I *live,*" he writes in a letter, "in the *present,*" underscoring the equivalent terms. In part, he must have learned this lesson from nature; for we should be like the grass, he says, existing in a perpetual moment, accepting all the accidents of the passage of time; or, as he says elsewhere, like chanticleer, that best philosopher that, like the child, does not spend his moments in idly regretting the past, or planning a future destined also to be idly regretted, but celebrates "this last instant of time," making the most of the precious fragments of eternity as they drift by; or like the brisk days of winter, rebuking sluggishness and inviting alertness; or like the morning, "the awakening hour," when we are least asleep, some part of us being awake that slumbers at all other times.

Yet Thoreau, it is clear, repeats the romantic doctrine of wonder with an important difference, or, rather, transforms it into a doctrine of awe. If we should live in the moment, instead of dwelling in the shadows of the past and the future, what should we seek in the moment—the pleasures of sense, luxurious reverie, anything that offers itself? The leaf of grass lives in the moment and for it that is the sum of the matter, but for us the central question is one of choice of content; we recognize that there may be more than one kind of moment. If your life in the present is not merely vegetative or bovine, what do you find in your moment that renders it so precious? I find Life, says the poet of romance—I do not postpone, I enjoy—enjoy Life without seeking to criticize it; so shall I realize all of it. Thoreau's answer, which is also Emerson's, would push farther: I, too, find life in the fleeting moments, he replies, yet not in the protean garb of the flux that entices you and confuses your vision, but in the adamantine reality that lies beneath. Wonderful as are the things of the flowing world, to which I respond as passionately as you do, there is an unchanging reality beneath them which I perceive only in my best moments, which evokes life in a part of my nature akin to this reality. If I could but sound these depths always I should find "eternity in each moment." Such a conception meant perpetual ecstasy, perpetual awe and not wonder, and Thoreau aimed at no less.[1]

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[1] Of children, in whom the sense of wonder is incomparably active, Thoreau had a most unromantic opinion: "Children appear to me as raw as the fresh fungi on a fence rail." Cf. the remark of Plato, quoted approvingly by Emerson: "A boy is the most vicious of all wild beasts." Not naïve sight, but wise insight, was the aim of all three.

If he could but disabuse his mind of Time and Space, and wake up! "I am trying to wake up," he says repeatedly in one way or another, "to wring slumber out of my pores; for, generally, I take events as unconcernedly as a fence-post,—absorb wet and cold like it, and am pleasantly tickled with lichens slowly spreading over me." He kept prodding himself, rubbing his eyes to see more truly, pinching his arms to come to a sense of full existence. "Obey the spur of the moment! . . . I feel the spur of the moment thrust deep into my side. The present is an inexorable rider." The task was never done; it was as hard for him to maintain angelic simplicity of vision as for the grim Puritans of old to preserve their virtue and keep the devil vainly clanking his chains. His universe must forever be *"herrlich wie am ersten Tag."* Every act, however humble, must be viewed in its larger relations—if it is only the sun ripening my beans, I must remember that that same sun "illumines at once a system of earths like ours." The simplest act will serve as well as any other, since beneath every experience of the actual world lies all of reality. It seemed to Thoreau that he could arrive at the meaning of life if he could but reduce living to essentials, and having simplified the problem, genuinely realize his relation to these essentials. That was the task he set before himself deliberately at Walden Pond, and less persistently all his life. He concluded—wrongly, no doubt—that this task must alienate him from men, in whom he found manifold evasion and deceit covering the reality, and send him to nature, who was artless. "I love nature, I love the landscape, because it is so sincere. It never cheats me. It never jests. It is cheerfully, musically earnest." So he sought reality in nature.

§ 2

Thus it was not to study the fauna and flora of Middlesex County that Thoreau spent his life in roaming over his familiar native countryside, though that was clearly one of his purposes; nor was it to view the ever-changing landscape with the charmed eye of the artist, though that was clearly one of his purposes.[1] What more than anything else brought him out in all weathers—rain, snow, sleet, fog—alone or with a more than superfluous companion, ever and again to the old forest shrines and hillcrest temples, was the mystic's hope of detecting "some trace of the Ineffable." "If by patience, if by watching, I can secure one new ray of light, can feel myself elevated for an instant upon Pisgah, the world which was dead prose to me become living and divine, shall I not watch ever? shall I not be a watchman henceforth? If by watching a whole year on the city's walls I may obtain a communication from heaven, shall I not do well to shut up my shop and turn a watchman?" So he sold his mornings to the Philistines, and shutting up his shop, dedicated his afternoons to the gods. Far afield he wandered, to shaggy wildernesses inhabited by apparitions of the red Indian, to kindly valleys basking in light, now seeking the alien comradeship of the muskrat and the great blue heron, and again the jest and youthful jollity of the bobolink and the buttercups; or, less often, in the village itself he would study the habits of men, "as curious to me as if they had been prairie-dogs." His life was not a getting-on, or a service, or a duty, but a quest of the Holy Grail, undertaken in all purity of body and mind and soul, and in the fulness of faith and devotion. "We always seem to be living," he felt, "just on the brink of a pure and lofty intercourse," and he would live so alertly as to be ever ready for the slightest relentings of the austere gods of the universe. "No man knoweth," he liked to repeat, "in what hour his life may come."

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[1] "Thoreau as Artist" I have dealt with in an article in *The Sewanee Review,* vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 2–13.

The hint might issue from any source. "It needs but a few wisps of straw in the sun, or some small word dropped, or that has long lain silent in some book." It might be in the strain of a sparrow, or in the expression of Indian grass, which, on one occasion, haunted him for a week "like the glance of an eye," or in an

"Unrecorded beam slanted across
Some upland pasture where the Johnswort grew,"

or in the sudden vision of fresh water above the station on returning to Concord after a trip, or even in the cosmical hum of a mosquito. To one who ranged over the countryside in this conviction, nature could indeed have no monotony: this Izaak Walton of the soul demanded no captured fish, but would be content with faint nibbles or none, for reminiscence and expectation could fill many a dull hour and landscape with golden visions.

To describe precisely the mode of these intimations is, of course, impossible. Thoreau frankly regards them all, "every variety and degree of inspiration from mere fulness of life to the most rapt mood," as given and not achieved, accepting without question the Transcendental doctrine of inspiration. Life would hardly have seemed to him worth living without the perennial possibility of revelation: take away that largess of the divine spirit, and man is but slightly raised above the worm. He would make himself "the thoroughfare of thrilling thoughts," he would receive "flashes of light from heaven." Most commonly he describes the experience in terms of light and heat. In the poem "Inspiration," a flame lights his heart. In the *Journal* is this vision of the light that never was:

> "I saw the sun falling on a distant white pine wood whose gray and moss-covered stems were visible amid the green, in an angle where this forest abutted on a hill covered with shrub oaks. It was like looking into dreamland. It is one of the avenues to my future. Certain coincidences like this are accompanied by a certain flash as of hazy lightning, flooding all the world suddenly with a tremulous serene light which is difficult to see long at a time."

The vision is evanescent: it comes suddenly, utters its oracle in unmistakable terms, and vanishes:

> "More swift its bolt than lightning is,
>   Its voice than thunder is more loud,
> It doth expand my privacies
>   To all, and leave me single in a crowd."

And Time and Space melt away:

> ". . . idle Time runs gadding by,
> And leaves me with Eternity alone."

To some extent he could control the inspiration, by setting the natural object on fire, or being set on fire by it, "with such tinder as I had, with such flint as I was." That is, he could lay himself open to influences, prepare the thoroughfare for the reception of divine visitors, simply by keeping his mind and body fresh and awake, and his soul hungry for manna. That fully attended to, he might often, at will, be "overcome," simply by changing his point of view, avoiding the habitual path or routine, for, really, "To perceive freshly, with fresh senses, is to be inspired," though here his inspiration is apparently indistinguishable from the wonder of romance. On the other hand, he must not be too active in his preparations, since the gods hold forwardness in contempt. "An influence must steal upon us when we expect it not." He must not direct a vulgar gaze full upon the countenance of divinity, but rather glance at the profile of the god, inwardly praying that he should turn his shining eyes upon him. As William Blake phrased it:

"He who bends to himself a joy
Does the wingèd life destroy,
But he who kisses a joy as it flies,
Lives in eternity's sunrise."

From this point of view, the birding and botanizing were not so ill a thing, affording just enough occupation—save when they amounted to a tyranny of observation—to prevent his too insistently "asking Nature to give" him "a sign." Even "the slight distraction of picking berries is favorable," he found, "to a mild, abstracted, poetic mood, to sequestered or transcendental thinking. I return ever more fresh to my mood from such slight interruptions." Constantly to await the sudden exaltation, and yet always to refrain from an overweening ardor, was Thoreau's dilemma as a mystic.

In his listening for divine addresses to the soul, and in his reading of earth, he found that, like others who have won intimacy with nature, he attained insight, not through excitement, but through serenity. "You must be calm before you can utter oracles"—and before you can receive them. "What was the excitement of the Delphic priestess compared with the calm wisdom of Socrates,—or whoever it was that was wise?" Without serenity, no wisdom. A state of excitement he regarded somewhat as if the grosser elements, the dregs, had been stirred, causing a murky cloudiness rather than perfect transparency; or, as he says in the *Journal,* using a different figure, we lose the clarity of that "still lake of purest crystal" which we are when serene. We should be so still that all the world is reflected in our deeps. "I was smoothed with an infinite stillness," he says of an evening on the river, and responding to the "vast hollow chambers of silence stretched away on every side," his being expanded till it filled them. Placidity, it may be noted in passing, is quite another emotional state; there is not only the calm of the unruffled lake, but also the calm of the stagnant ditch. That is the calm that envelops the mean soul; quite other is the revealing calm of serenity. So peaceful are the moments of serenity that Thoreau describes them as "too still for emotion; they have woollen feet." It is in such moments that nature seems on the verge of articulation, putting aside for the time her alien sternness, her hardness of surface, and letting her feeling express itself in her features: warm and gentle she is, Mother Earth, with ready lap and wise whisperings. Thoreau's experience thus points once more to the fact that nature, if she speaks at all, speaks when she pacifies, not when she excites. For this essential serenity, the unostentatious landscapes of Concord were more favorable by far than a mountainous country, with its sense of unrest, would have been. The romantic love of nature in her more savage aspects has ordinarily brought intoxication rather than insight; only the lifelong dweller among lofty mountains has found their sublimities fruitful, and he has found them so because they enveloped him in tranquillity, not because they evoked a passionate and nameless desire.

An approach to nature allied to serenity is pensiveness—that state of slight abstraction from the factual world, mixed with "a certain fertile sadness which I would not avoid, but rather earnestly seek." When pensiveness is purely introspective, it passes into melancholy, and then into a more or less desolate loneliness. Thoreau's pensiveness, however, was not purely introspective, but dwelt upon the outer world of nature, and now and again, without warning, it was illuminated with one of those flashes which kindled his insight and thus revealed a new, startlingly brilliant nature, as the lightning brings an instant of noon to the black night. Small wonder, then, that he rather prized than combated pensiveness and kindred states of feeling. As for loneliness—who has a right to fear that when the world of spirit is everywhere?

A happier, though wistful, approach to nature is that which one can only roughly term affection. It ranges from a lively friendliness to a thirst for unprecedented intimacy. Sometimes—but rarely—it is couched in the language of the love of the sexes: "I love and could embrace the shrub-oak with its scaly garment of leaves rising above the snow. . . . Rigid as iron, clear as the atmosphere, hardy as virtue, innocent and sweet as a maiden, is the shrub-oak. I felt a positive yearning to one bush this afternoon. There was a match found for me at last—I fell in love with a shrub-oak." More often it resembles the love of child for parent, and *Alma Natura* responds with warm affection, as in this subtly beautiful paragraph:

> "It is a luxury to muse by the wall-side in the sunshine of a September afternoon,—to cuddle down under a gray stone, and hearken to the siren song of the cricket. Day and night seem henceforth but accidents, and the time is always a still eventide, and as the close of a happy day. Parched fields and mulleins gilded with the slanting rays are my diet. I know of no word so fit to express this disposition of Nature as *Alma Natura.*"

The same feeling is described charmingly in the well-known passage ("This is a delicious evening . . .") at the beginning of "Solitude," in *Walden*. The word "imbibes" in this passage—"imbibes delight through every pore"—suggests the more passionate forms of this affectionate approach to nature. In his use of such words as "imbibe," "absorb," "drink in," there is commonly a note of passion, a sharp hunger of the emotions. "I love and could eat the brown earth," he exclaims. "Ah, dear nature, the mere remembrance, after a short forgetfulness, of the pine woods! I come to it as a hungry man to a crust of bread." Natural objects he likes to refer to as constituting his "diet," sometimes an intoxicating diet. His appetite, he says in a *Journal* entry, was for years so strong that he fed "on the pine forest's edge seen against the winter horizon," and ranged about "like a gray moose," feeding his imagination on the spiring tops of the trees. Nourished thus on nectar and ambrosia, he may have felt at times deified, a Bacchic reveler achieving, in his ecstasy, moments of true vision. "Enthusiasm is a supernatural serenity."

The modern seeker after inspiration has all too often spurned the reason and the will and abandoned himself to the exciting sensuous life of the flux, cherishing the discolored dreams of this life as spiritual revelation. From Rousseau onward we have witnessed abundant cases of this hypnotism of the mirage world, now in the form of unbridled, rampant emotion, again in the form of dreamy sentimentalism. Is Thoreau, in this respect, a Rousseauist or a true Platonist? That hunger which has just been described, though modified, no doubt, by instincts that may be called Platonic, is essentially sentimental. And he had, also, his hours of sensuous dissolving into nature—hours when his customary reflection degenerated into reverie. Thus, one sultry day, drifting on the sluggish waters of the pond, he loses his identity, is dissolved in the haze, he says, and asserts in the vein of the pseudo-mystic, "I almost cease to live and begin to be." So, again, in "The Thaw," he says:

"Fain would I stretch me by the highway-side
To thaw and trickle in the melting snow;
That mingled, soul and body, with the tide,
I too may through the pores of nature flow."

That is clearly not a Platonic impulse. Its values are far more medicinal than spiritual. It came to him rarely, at all events—as if a revisitation of the sweet intoxication of youth, when, as he says, he was "part and parcel of Nature." Surely, if one seeks to name the leading error in Thoreau's intercourse with nature, it is the tyranny of observation, and not the abandonment of sentimental mysticism.

Far from holding intercourse with nature easy—to be had whenever he chose to paralyze mind and will so that his sensuous life might mingle with that of nature unhindered—Thoreau was fully aware of the actual elusiveness of nature. "Nature is so reserved!" he exclaims. "She always retreats as I advance." "A momentous silence reigns always in the woods, and their meaning seems just ripening into expression. But alas! they make no haste." This is the open secret of nature. He professes no esoteric initiation; he is no priest of nature but a profoundly devoted layman, now and then rewarded with a glimpse of the holy of holies, but a glimpse of a thing so rare, so strange, so perfect, that when it is over it leaves no distinct image. Nor was there any vulgarity in his relation to nature; at the least she was a maid to be loved with all tenderness, at the most an angel of purity. Possession he could not hope for, perhaps did not really desire. If she seemed to bend over him in sympathy, he might as well spare himself the delirium of proximity, for perfect knowledge of her she would not grant—only a little, to encourage him to walk the more erectly and to reverence more constantly the infinite deeps within her. Sitting on the cliff above Fair Haven on a day in spring, gazing upon the river and the awakening woods and listening to the songs of birds unheard for a year, he can only say, "It is as sweet a mystery to me as ever, what this world is." Almost it seemed the better he knew her, the less he knew her.

What was a sweet mystery among the gracious white birches and venerable pine groves of Concord was a sublime interrogation in the primeval forest. On a great mountain in the heart of Maine he found nature "something savage and awful, though beautiful":

> "I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work . . . I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has been so strange to me . . . Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense! Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *where* are we?"

Face to face with nature in her wilder aspects, he was all but terrified.

§ 3

Yet Thoreau found in himself, as he said in his first book, "a singular yearning toward all wildness"; later he prepared a lecture on "Walking, or the Wild," and in all his writing celebrated what he liked to call the Wild. Why did this lover of Quarles and Herbert and Milton, this student of the humanities of Greece and Rome, so constantly sing the praises of wildness, so earnestly urge the gospel of the Wild? "Ben Jonson exclaims, 'How near to good is what is fair!' So I would say, 'How near to good is what is wild!'" Whence comes this change?

He was seeking, as we have seen, an unchanging reality in nature, the One beneath the many, and through his various approaches to nature he attained those moments of "inspiration" which transformed or obliterated the many and permitted, as it seemed, glimpses of the One; yet always a mystery, sweet or awful, lay beyond—the Nature of nature—the Wild. This he conceived as a life "pasturing freely where we never wander." If he were only alive enough, he would be able to enter upon that larger, freer existence which the Wild leads, since "The most alive is the wildest." He would draw nearer to the Wild—the farthest reality in nature—by rendering himself alive, alert, awake.

Actual attainment of the goal he seems to have regarded as a doubtful good, as if the infinite would no longer be such when reached, as if the element of strangeness, in which he took a thoroughly romantic delight, would be relinquished. Besides, he also conceived of a human infinite, as we shall see presently, and was not content to commit himself utterly to the leading of the Wild. Even if an underlying unity brought the two infinites together at last, he loved the human spiritual order too well to be satisfied with nature. Sometimes he would breathe the humane air of his proper spiritual order; sometimes the wilder air of the spiritual order of nature.

When the latter impulse dominated him, it seemed to him that progress toward the Wild could be accomplished only through a veritable absorption of matter. We have already noted his passionate desire to "eat the brown earth"; or, as he puts it another day, he "worships" the brownish light in the sod on certain wet days in March, feeling as if he "could eat the very crust of the earth; I never felt so terrene, never sympathized so with the surface of the earth." Later in the same month he could "stroke and kiss the very sward, it is so fair." Again, he tells a correspondent that he grows "savager and savager every day, as if fed on raw meat."

That raw meat had its powerful charms is indicated by the passage in *Walden* in which he tells how, one evening as he was returning to the hut, chancing to see a woodchuck steal across his path in the gathering darkness, he "felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw." On one or two occasions while he lived at the pond, he goes on to confess, he found himself wandering through the woods "like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me." The whole chapter, indeed ("Higher Laws"), is a study of the dual life he was impelled to lead, one rank and savage, the other spiritual, or to use his own terms, one wild, the other human.

Thoreau's lust (hardly too strong a word) for rainstorms and swamps is one of the most conspicuous instances of his yearning for wildness. He would like to sit in a distant cave throughout "a three-weeks' storm, cold and wet," to give a tone to his system. Better still a swamp; to have your house abut on a forbidding swamp is to dwell next to Elysium. Although for some reason he failed to select so advantageous a site for his woodland cabin, he visited the swamps of his parish with assiduous frequency, and entered into their life, in a double sense, with the keenest sympathy. Sometimes, as if to be civilized, he aims, ostensibly, to go a-cranberrying, or to find the kalmia, though what he always relishes is not the cranberries or the kalmia, but the "cold and bracing" wading in the stagnant water and muck, "amid the water andromeda and the sphagnum, scratching my legs with the first and sinking deep in the last. The water is now gratefully cool to my legs, so far from being poisoned in the strong waters of the swamp. It is a sort of baptism for which I had waited." Superior, however, to merely wading would be the luxury of standing "up to one's chin in some retired swamp for a whole summer's day, scenting the sweet-fern and bilberry blows, and lulled by the minstrelsy of gnats and mosquitoes. A day passed in the society of those Greek sages, such as described in the 'Banquet' of Xenophon, would not be comparable with the dry wit of cranberry vines and the fresh Attic salt of the moss beds. Say twelve hours of genial and familiar intercourse with the leopard frog."

This emotional attachment has its intellectual counterpart in that doctrine of the Wild which he preached in season and out of season. Briefly stated, it is this: that all civilization refers back to primitive nature, derives thence its title to permanence, and ever and anon deliberately reunites itself with its source of vitality. If it does not, it is a moribund civilization. Thus, in the fable of Romulus and Remus, Thoreau reads the eternal truth that every state that has attained eminence has drawn nourishment and vigor from *Alma Natura.* The children of the Roman Empire, not being suckled by wolves, gave place to the northern barbarians who were. The continent of America is the she-wolf of our time, he goes on to say, and the children of the diseased civilization of Europe, responding to her coarse ministrations, are reinvigorated, are enabled to found here a new Rome. In time this Rome of the West will likewise languish, if the rank soil that sustains it is allowed to become exhausted; it can be maintained only by ever-recurrent reliance on the Wild. "Surely good courage will not flag here on the Atlantic border, as long as we are flanked by the Fur Countries. There is enough in that sound to cheer one under any circumstances. The spruce, the hemlock, and the pine will not countenance despair."

Never was there a more convinced believer in the essential goodness of nature. Her rectitude is attested, he asserts, by the uprightness of trees; and "Disease and a rain-drop cannot coexist." In her large equanimity and antiseptic purity, she is medicine for body and soul, and no disease is beyond her magical healing power. "They bury poisoned sheep up to the necks in earth to take the poison out of them." She is completely healthy and innocent, and is an ideal to guide ever erring humanity. One might regard Thoreau, on a hasty examination, as accepting the charming myth of a nature of the Golden Age, smiling, tender, artless, not the slimy, hoary, shagged beast of a nature of prehistoric periods. But actually he had the modern vision of nature as red in tooth and claw. There is a tragedy, he said, at the end of the life of every wild creature. His "innocent" nature is fond of violence, fond of what a superficial view holds repulsive—that is one aspect of her innocence. "We are cheered," he wrote in a significant passage in *Walden,* "when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us, and deriving health and strength from the repast. . . . I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp,—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! . . . The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence." Thoreau's outlook on nature, indeed, does not suffer from a trace of Transcendental anæmia. He looks the facts in the eye, even the ugliest, sees the struggle for existence no less than the inspiriting sunset, and gives us, in the end, something like a whole view. That view was, of course, predestined to be favorable. Even so dread a word as Necessity he stripped of its terrors by regarding it as "only another name for inflexibility of good." Nature was bound to be good. No aspect of nature's wildness could repel him.

Everywhere he looked for the Wild. "In literature," he asserted, "it is only the wild that attracts us," though here the term means little more than spontaneity, the absence of conscious technique and conventional thought and feeling. English literature as a whole, the best of it included, he pronounced "essentially tame and civilized," imitative of the classics. Grecian mythology had its root in a fertile nature, but even the classics fall short of a perfect wildness. Again, he peered into the past of his American civilization to see what primitive vigor lay behind the modern culture. He had more than his share of the romantic absorption in the remote, in the primitive, in sources. "Strange spirits, demons," he says of the Indians, "whose eyes could never meet mine; with another nature and another fate than mine." The old warfare, waged in the very fields he walked on, seemed to him unreal, shadowy, and yet he loved to muse over it, with a still intensity, hoping now and again to obtain a true vision of the life of those far days. He would know "what manner of men they were, how they lived here, their relation to nature, their arts and their customs, their fancies and superstitions. They paddled over these waters, they wandered in these woods, and they had their fancies and beliefs connected with the sea and the forest, which concern us quite as much as the fables of Oriental nations do"—and that means a good deal when said by so devout a lover of the Bhagavad-Gita.

Foolish indeed, our poets and philosophers, who regret that we have no antiquities, no ruins to remind us of our past, for everywhere is our soil laden with relics, arrowheads, implements, stone chips—the wind can hardly blow away the surface, he says, without bringing to light the chips made by some aboriginal fletcher. He looked for such relics incessantly. It was actually his habit, he states, when, in the fall, some sandy field had been plowed, to "take note of it," and next spring to pay a visit as soon as the earth began to dry. Often he spent whole afternoons, especially in the spring, in pacing back and forth over such a sandy field. Indian relics were the gold which the sands of Concord yielded, and indeed he often thought at night "with an inexpressible satisfaction and yearning of the *arrow-headiferous* sands of Concord." He trained his eye for an arrowhead to an astonishing keenness, so that, in comparison, his walking companion, if he had one, was virtually blind. There is a familiar story that suggests this. His companion remarking, "I do not see where you find your Indian arrowheads," Thoreau stooped to the ground, picked one up, and gave it to him with the remark, "Here is one." Luck, in such matters, is always on the side of the sharp eye.

Why did Thoreau admire the Indian? First, perhaps, on account of his relation to nature. The Indian was fitted to see and understand the wildness of nature as no white man could, because he was really at home in the woods. "The charm of the Indian to me is that he stands free and unconstrained in Nature, is her inhabitant and not her guest, and wears her easily and gracefully." He envied the Indian this familiar, offhand relation, and reproduced it remarkably well when one considers how introspective he was. If he was at home anywhere, it was in the woods and meadows of Concord. And next he admired the Indian's reticence and stoicism. Though doubtless inborn in Thoreau, these traits were almost certainly greatly strengthened in him through emulation: had there been no Indian background, one suspects that his Indian traits would not have flourished. In *Walden* he relates with gusto the story of Winslow's reception by Massasoit and his tribe. "They had nothing to eat themselves, and they were wiser than to think that apologies could supply the place of food to their guests; so they drew their belts tighter and said nothing about it." Surely that is as typical of Thoreau as it is of Massasoit's Indians—he went through life forever tightening his belt and saying nothing about it. It is mainly for these traits—an easy relation to nature, reticence, and stoical endurance

—that Thoreau admired the Indian, aside, to be sure, from the misty picturesqueness of his life in aboriginal Concord. Nothing suggests better the intensity of his admiration than his death-bed words—"moose" and "Indian."

To the Maine woods he made three excursions to satisfy his appetite for wildness and to study the Indian at first hand. He succeeded in learning a great deal, and in satisfying his appetite for wildness, to the point of nausea. He did not go to the woods, he complains, for moose-hunting, and he condemns the Indian's savageness—a very genuine type of wildness—roundly. "What a coarse and imperfect use Indians and hunters make of nature! No wonder that their race is so soon exterminated. I already, and for weeks afterward, felt my nature the coarser for this part of my woodland experience." He returned to the "smooth but still varied landscape" of Concord with manifest relief. Wildness and the wilderness are a very good thing, no doubt, but they are not all of life; for a place to spend one's years in, it seemed to him, Concord was immeasurably superior to the wilderness, "necessary as the latter is for a resource and a background, the raw material of all our civilization." He goes on to remark that it is the partially cultivated country that has been the source of inspiration to the poets of the past, and will be to the poets of the future. The logger and pioneer precede the poet—eat the wild honey, perhaps, but the locusts also; remove the decaying wood and the spongy mosses of the rank forest, and build hearths and humanize nature for the poet. It is well for the poet, at proper intervals, to visit the logger's path and the Indian's trail; but let him dwell where "art and refinement" have altered the face of nature by making it more expressive, not only of man, but also to man.

IV. Humanist

§ 1

Thoreau will remain forever baffling if we insist on resolving into perfect harmony all his ideas and impulses, since there is every reason to believe he did not himself harmonize them. More even than Emerson he had the modern preference for a philosophy open to all the winds of heaven. Apparently never tempted to erect a closed system of truth, he set out to discover in nature and in himself more and more truth or life, without stopping at any point to survey the kingdom he was extending. He would not even have been content, like the chambered nautilus, to build ampler and ampler mansions, for each mansion would have been a prison-house: intellectually if not ethically, he hated walls with all the modern passion for freedom. "Shall I with pains erect a heaven of blue glass over myself, though when it is done I shall be sure to gaze still on the true ethereal heaven far above?" Accused of resulting inconsistencies, he might have referred the responsibility to life itself, or he might have indicated, more plausibly, the unity of tendency underlying his specious contradictions. Of all the contradictions that have plagued his overzealous interpreters, perhaps only one refuses to be explained away: his assumption, one moment, that nature is a precious actuality containing the higher reality of spirit, and another moment that nature is pure illusion and that the only reality is that of the human spirit. On the basis of the former assumption, he goes to the Maine woods to arrive at a better knowledge of the ultimate wildness of nature; on the basis of the latter he asserts, "It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. . . . I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess in Concord, *i.e.,* than I import into it." Which is the true Thoreau—he who is absorbed in the study of external nature and the quest of inspiration from nature, or he who is absorbed in the inner spiritual nature of man? Indeed, he is neither, but both. If we ask which of the two is dominant, however, our answer must be that the usual view entertained by his readers—the view that he is dominantly a disciple of nature—is erroneous, and that he is first of all a disciple of the life within.

In the preceding chapter we have seen Thoreau seeking reality conceived as within nature, and finding, when all is said, very little—oftenest only the illusory reality of wonder rather than an awed sense of the Ineffable. His hunger grew by what it fed on, till it must have become, at times, frenetic. As he might have put it, the Wild made him wild. Surely he was inclined to feel this an error. Notwithstanding the medicinal virtues of wildness for the individual or for society at large, notwithstanding the joy—a savage joy—to be derived from an occasional immersion in this wildness, he rarely assumed that such experiences brought him into contact with spirit. Rebuffed by nature, he turned within for solace and wisdom, finding there the unquestioned reality he had failed to find in external things—a reality upon which external things, if they existed at all, depended utterly for their meaning.

For according to his sketchy idealism, apparently in the main borrowed from Emerson, "man is all in all, Nature nothing, but as she draws him out and reflects him." He would fain get a side view, he says, a suggestive glimpse of a thing, rather than stare it in the face deliberately, because what really concerns him is not there, but consists in his relation to it. The thing itself is "a mere reflecting surface." All harks back to the spiritual universe within man, all points to the inferiority of the actual. Stirred by the dramatic drowning of Margaret Fuller, he is perplexed at the "singular prominence and importance" commonly attached to the "stream of events which we consent to call actual," and concludes brusquely enough, "I do not think much of the actual. . . . It is a sort of vomit in which the unclean love to wallow." Far more real is "that other mightier stream which carries us along with it." On the one stream our bodies float; on the other, our spirits. That dualistic division is unquestionably Thoreau's normal view. Once, and I think once only, he expressed himself as having faith in the senses because, if we only perfected them, we might see God. "Are we to be put off and amused in this life, as it were with a mere allegory? Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely?" This exaltation of the Flux, dictated by impatience, reminds us of the mood of pantheistic reverie which Thoreau now and then indulged. But the conception is even rarer than the mood, and does not count in comparison with the innumerable references to nature as a symbol of spirit.

A familiar statement occurs in the curious poem entitled "The Inward Morning," of which the first two stanzas read:

"Packed in my mind lie all the clothes
Which outward nature wears,
And in its fashion's hourly change
It all things else repairs.

"In vain I look for change abroad,
And can no difference find,
Till some new ray of peace uncalled
Illumines my inmost mind."

Day would not dawn, he says, were it not for this inward morning. In the mind is all; there lie packed all the clothes of nature ("like a young lady's trunk going to Mount Desert," says the lively Channing), and what the mind chooses to wear, or is inspired to wear, determines what the aspect of nature is. "This earth which is spread out like a map around me is but the lining of my inmost soul exposed." "The seasons and all their changes are in me. . . . Almost I believe the Concord would not rise and overflow its banks again, were I not here. After a while I learn what my moods and seasons are. . . . The perfect correspondence of Nature to man, so that he is at home in her!" "Our thoughts and sentiments answer to the revolutions of the seasons, as two cog-wheels fit into each other. A year is made up of a certain series and number of sensations and thoughts which have their language in nature." If I am excited by the roar of a cataract, I may well remember that there is "a waterfall which corresponds even to Niagara somewhere within" me. If I would see my own mind, I look at the sky. Even the smallest things in nature are the counterpart of a spiritual substance within us—"Each humblest plant, or weed, as we call it, stands there to express some thought or mood of ours." Time and space are but forms of thought. "I am time and the world. . . . In me are summer and winter, village life and commercial routine, pestilence and famine and refreshing breezes, joy and sadness, life and death." And he concludes by asking a question that must have taken him a long way—"Why did I invent time but to destroy it?"

Thus, as Thoreau roamed over his Concord countryside, he conceived himself, rightly or wrongly, as becoming acquainted with himself, with the spiritual universe latent in him as in every man, and not simply with outward nature. This spiritual universe he looked upon as static, fixed for all time, as in Plato, so that his task was to come to know it, rather than, as in the German romantic philosophy, to create it for himself. He could write, in the German way, "This world is but a canvas to our imaginations"; yet his was no world-positing ego—instinctively, if he had known the followers of Fichte and Schelling, he would have shunned that invitation to excess, to infinite longing, to indulgence in the nauseating delights of the lower ranges of human emotion. The idea of correspondence, indeed, meant in his case a veritable discipline. Nature will not reveal man to himself unless he fits himself to perceive the correspondence. He is to rely, not on the outer world of nature, but on his own inner nature—"the pond will not seem like a mountain tarn, but a low pool, a silent muddy water, a place for fishermen." He knew that he could not get the better of nature, drive a shrewd Yankee bargain with such as she: here, as in political economy, he says, supply answers to demand. "Nature does not cast pearls before swine. There is just as much beauty visible to us in the landscape as we are prepared to appreciate—not a grain more." [1] He proceeds to explain this by reminding us of the familiar truth that different persons see different objects in nature, that you see mainly what you are looking for, that when you have once become familiar with the idea, or image, of a plant, for example, you can hardly see anything else. Nature's supply depends on your demand, your fitness to receive. This view accounts, in part, for the discipline of the will and mind to which Thoreau made himself submit.

Depreciating the actual, he asserts roundly that "our thoughts are the epochs in our lives: all else is but as a journal of the winds that blew while we were here." The truly rich man, he says, is he who finds delight in his own thoughts. Such were the Hindus, with their perpetual contemplation. Such was he himself, when the gods were kind. "If I am visited by a thought, I chew that cud each successive morning, as long as there is any flavor in it. Until my keepers shake down some fresh fodder." His life at Walden offered a perfect opportunity for reflection, and well did he use it. Some of his pleasantest hours there, he tells us, were during the interminable rain-storms of spring and autumn, when, confined to his hut, he enjoyed a long evening memorable in its soothing roar of the elements and its sense of solitude, "in which many thoughts had time to take root and unfold themselves."

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[1] The same is true of the relation of man to man: "That virtue we appreciate is as much ours as another's. We see only so much as we possess."

No doubt his thinking assumed various forms: more often syllogistic than Emerson's, it was also more fanciful, and, if not so elevated, was perhaps more flexible. Not often was it idle, inchoate dreaming. There was a backbone in his mind, so to speak, that would bend but not yield completely. Though clothed in images, his thoughts were not the disordered dream of the nerveless sentimentalist, but for the most part shone before him bright as the world of the Greek. His mind had clarity, delicacy, grasp, penetration, masculine energy, as his books show. The man who wrote *Walden* was not given to empty reverie, but to genuine reflection and contemplation.

Wittingly beset by the tyranny of observation, Thoreau welcomed occasions that encouraged thinking. Walking by night had at least this advantage, he found, that moonlight is more favorable to reflection than sunlight. "The intense light of the sun unfits me for meditation, makes me wander in my thought; my life is too diffuse and dissipated." Again, he liked certain unseasonable days in midsummer, when "the coolness concentrated your thought." Solitude, again, invited fruitful brooding, as society did not, and he was therefore glad to spend most of his days apart from men. Observation and reflection together succeeded in worsting the hobgoblin of solitude—a miserable loneliness; for only once in the Walden solitude did Thoreau experience an unpleasant sense of being alone, and then but for an hour. The solitude of winter he rejoiced in, the "dear privacy and retirement and solitude which winter makes possible!" That was his favorite season, if he had one, and first of all it stood for the inward life, as his italics suggest: "Winter, with its *inward-*

ness, is upon us. A man is constrained to sit down, and to think." Far from needing a rich, glowing landscape, he was deeply satisfied with the cold and barren splendors of winter and of autumn—for "November Eatheart" was also very dear to him. He relished a November day such "as will almost oblige a man to eat his own heart. . . . Ah, but is not this a glorious time for your deep inward fires?" He liked to assert that his inward wealth was in steadfast proportion to the outward poverty and dreariness, and doubtless we may believe him. But, after all, there is an occasion for reflection superior to any of those already mentioned. Thinking he viewed sometimes as the clearing-house for impressions, or "influences," more or less unconsciously gathered in his converse with the outer world; and he was wise enough to recognize that the best place for this clarification was within doors. "Out of doors," he confesses, "my thought is commonly drowned, as it were, and shrunken, pressed down by stupendous piles of light ethereal influences, for the pressure of the atmosphere is still fifteen pounds to a square inch. I can do little more than preserve my equilibrium and resist the pressure of the atmosphere. I can only nod like the rye-heads in the breeze. I expand more surely in my chamber, as far as expression goes, as if that pressure were taken off; but here outdoors is the place to store influences." His expression expands, he means, of course, because his mind contracts, concentrates. If expansive, partly obedient to the currents of nature, when out of doors, he concentrated within doors,[1] allying himself with that greater stream of the eternities—"The stream I love unbounded flows," to use the phrase of his friend Emerson. In the presence of nature, he prized sounds; in his chamber, silence, "the communing of a conscious soul with itself." Sound, he remarks, is when we hear outwardly, silence when we hear inwardly. Silence, like nearly everything that he rated highly, is thus of man, not of nature: "It takes a man to make a room silent," or, he might have added, to make nature silent.

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[1] *"Erst Empfindung, dann Gedanken,*
Erst ins Weite, dann zu Schranken."
—Goethe.

Despite all his observation, despite the acuteness of his perceptive faculties, he was an ardent votary of what he termed "a kind of Brahminical, Artesian, Inner Temple life." It pleased him to contrast his own piety with the brazen triviality of his fellow men, who toiled and chattered and bargained and cheated and wallowed in the actual, while he found joy, peace, and certainty in the unchanging real. While they sent forth their "confused *tintinnabulum*," he hearkened to the still voices of Silence and Solitude, and came to his bearings. He was a *Doppelgänger* with a difference, for the part of him that, as he says, was spectator to the rest, ironically forming its own opinions and uttering them, was the universal spirit, "no more I than it is you." Instead of being "wholly involved in nature," he was subservient to the spirit within. This, and not nature, was the inspirer that he referred to when he suggested that, if he did not keep pace with his companions, it was because he heard a different drummer.

§2

His was no gospel of loafing and inviting the soul. Instead of merely inviting the soul, he would go to bring her, and instead of loafing, he would work unceasingly. *This* was his gospel, rather: "Many of our days should be spent, not in vague expectations and lying on our oars, but in carrying out deliberately and faithfully the hundred little purposes which every man's genius must have suggested to him." There was a grim determination and an inflexible faithfulness about everything that Thoreau did; he did not lie on his oars and drift with the current, but sat stiffly at the helm, directing his course with, if anything, an excess of concentration. He knew, if no one else did, where he was going, and in his mastery had a lively contempt for the sentimental mode of life, which, as he puts it, does not set a goal before itself and "cannot build a causeway to its objects," but idly "sits on a bank looking over a bog, singing its desires." The tormenting desires of European, especially continental romanticism—the sighs, the aching void, the meltings, the sweet abandon, the boundless longing and utter weariness—were more remote from his experience than the moral integrity of the Puritans and the serene reason of the Greeks. Uniting the spirit of the Puritans with the purpose of the Greeks, he would maintain an incessant surveillance over himself and "subject passion and appetite to reason." Whatever his achievement, his purpose, as stated here and elsewhere, is precisely that of the ethical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, remote beyond measure from the teachings of the high priest of romanticism, Rousseau. It is entirely certain that when Thoreau speaks, in the romantic vein, of following his genius, or instincts, he does not unwittingly urge, as romanticism too often does, obedience to the instincts of his temperament, but the very opposite—

the subjection of these instincts to the instincts of a higher, and peculiarly human, self: "What is peculiar in the life of a man consists not in his obedience, but his opposition, to his instincts. In one direction or another he strives to live a supernatural life." The term instincts here obviously refers to those of the natural man—the life of spontaneous desire that man shares with other animals—more complex, subtle, passionate, and conflicting in man than in the other animals, and thus liable to dehumanize him, reduce him to the natural level, by mastering the human (*i.e.*, "supernatural") man. Referring to external nature apart from man, Thoreau speaks of it, in the language of mystical philosophy and religion, as the barren and prosaic scene of human existence, "fit not to live in but merely to pass through" and marvels that "here so divine a creature as man does actually live, Man, the crowning fact, the god we know. . . . Who shall say that there is no God, if there is a *just* man?" We are in this world, indeed, as gods in exile.

Gods in exile, no less; yet mortal beings, too, capable of degradation by reason of our incarnation and consequent attachment to nature, the land of our exile and our dear earthly home. There was no aversion from nature in Thoreau—who has found her fairer and better, who has praised and cultivated the senses, more than he? He would not deny nature, but transcend her, subject her to reason and the higher self. Instead of inviting his soul through loafing, through a Wordsworthian "wise passiveness," he could become human or divine, he felt, only through what Aristotle called acts of working, what he himself generally called discipline. "All wisdom is the reward of a discipline, conscious or unconscious"; "That aim in life is highest which requires the highest and finest discipline"—in such remarks, scattered throughout his *Journal,* do we come very close to the true center of Thoreau. Being a Transcendentalist, he went too far, no doubt, in small matters, putting aside tobacco, coffee, spirits, often meats, as stultifying, and making of outdoor bathing a kind of spiritual cleansing. Discipline in the sexual life apparently gave him little trouble (think of European romanticism!)—perhaps too little trouble. Though averse from the actual, if less so than he supposed, he welcomed the discipline of work with the hands, of hoeing and wood-chopping and carpentering, and unlike Emerson, who sought the same discipline, taught himself to excel in such occupations. In his natural history studies, again, he aimed at exact observation and record, and succeeded in a larger measure than one would expect of a man who was more philosopher and poet than scientist. His wide reading, also, was not a matter of diversion but rather of enlightenment and still more of discipline; especially was this true of his study of the Latin and Greek authors in the original (the dead languages did not die over again, for him, when he left college) and of his reading of the "scriptures of the nations." [1]

But the chief discipline of all, including, indeed, all others, was obedience to his genius—not the "genius" of the German romanticists but the Socratic inner witness, the "heavenly monitor" of Milton. He found it, as Emerson found it despite his saintliness, the sternest of taskmasters, very different from the "genial" expansive self of the typical romanticist. While the romanticist of the nineteenth century or of the twentieth, conceiving man's genius or inner nature as a single and not a dual thing, has merely asked, "What do I inwardly desire?" and has too often hearkened to the natural man that answered, Thoreau, perceiving the conflict of voices, the dualism of desire and spiritual leading, asked, "What *ought* I to will—what does this heart of flame within me, unconcerned, impersonal, the light of the divine, demand of me?" So soon as he saw his goal, he proceeded thitherward without rest or deviation, like a true son of the Puritans. Obeying, like Socrates, an unwritten law superior to that of the State, he acted out his assertion that "They are the lovers of law and order who observe the law when the government breaks it," and if he escaped the death penalty and suffered only an unheroically brief imprisonment in Concord jail, it was partly because, unlike Socrates and like Milton at the Restoration, he was not viewed as a flagrantly dangerous enemy of society.[1] He was more fortunate than his hero John Brown, whose methods were indeed dangerous, though his purpose was the highest—"the embodiment of principle," in Thoreau's view, a typical Puritan who might, he said, have died in Cromwell's England and reappeared in nineteenth-century America.

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[1] Emerson's remark, "It cost him nothing to say No; indeed he found it much easier than to say Yes," deserves a larger context than it has (*Lectures and Biographical Sketches,* p. 454). The act of placing a limit to his desires seemed in itself to give him satisfaction, aside from its humanizing results.

In his love of "principle" and "discipline"—words that he never tired of using—Thoreau himself was a latter-day Puritan. If he mentions the Puritans, it is always to praise them. His ideals of conduct he derived, not from the European romanticists, of whom he knew little, but from classical writers and from the Puritans. While his studies in the classics made him the foremost Greek scholar among the Concord authors, his interest in his Puritan background perhaps gave him preëminence in that field likewise, even over Hawthorne. Seeking the Wild in cold and bleak places, in winter fields and on wind-swept mountains, he sought at the same time, as he states, a "Puritan toughness." He, too, would be a pioneer: "We have need to be as sturdy pioneers still as Miles Standish, or Church, or Lovewell. We are to follow on another trail, it is true, but one as convenient for ambushes. What if the Indians are exterminated, are not savages as grim prowling about the clearings to-day?" The savages are in man himself. If Thoreau imputed "natural goodness" to external nature, it is clear that he also imputed "natural depravity" to man, *i.e.*, to the fluctuant life of instinct and desire that relates man to the flux of external nature. The very thing that is good in nature is thus evil in man, unless governed by the supernatural in man. "I am impure and worthless," he writes repeatedly with quite the Puritan accent. "Did you ever remember the moment when you were not mean?" A casual reader of Thoreau may be a little puzzled by his assertion that he is "a good deal of a scamp" and that he "could enumerate a list of as rank offenses as ever reached the nostrils of heaven." A close reader, however, will soon be convinced that these unspeakable offenses are merely variants of the one predominant sin, spiritual indolence —a relaxation, or wilting, of that inner and impersonal life which he would maintain, if he could, in trembling ecstasy. Try as he would, his practical life was bound to look shabby in comparison with the life painted by the imagination. He could only fight on incessantly, while his devil, "with a leer," stood ever "close at hand." Yet the devil, he perceived, is not without his uses; wisely, less facilely than Browning, he welcomed each rebuff ("We cannot well do without our sins; they are the highway of our virtue"), and earnestly aimed "to live a better life," and to love purity above all else:

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[1] Emerson was perhaps less stringent, certainly more prudent, in his obedience to the inner witness, as is suggested by the story, too true to be discarded by its suspicious neatness, of his visit to Thoreau's cell. When he asked, "Henry, why are you here?" the rejoinder was, "Why are you *not* here?"

> "What more glorious condition of being can we imagine than from impure to be becoming pure? It is almost desirable to be impure that we may be the subject of this improvement. That I am innocent to myself! That I love and reverence my life! That I am better fitted for a lofty society to-day than I was yesterday! To make my life a sacrament! What is nature without this lofty tumbling? May I treat myself with more and more respect and tenderness. May I not forget that I am impure and vicious. May I not cease to love purity. May I go to my slumbers as expecting to arise to a new and more perfect day."

In his dreams, which he watched as carefully as his thoughts, he supposed he had a touchstone of his character, and rejoiced when in them he had "loved virtue and nobleness." Much, indeed, of the essential Thoreau is contained in that laconic *Journal* entry that reads: "Dreamed of purity last night." It might have occurred in the diary of a seventeenth-century Puritan.

Although, as a Transcendentalist, he gave expression to his temperament sufficiently to produce, as he says somewhere, "a strong dose of myself," he was far more profoundly interested, as a Puritan, in character—the impersonal self in action. "Only character can command our reverent love. It is all mysteries in itself." It is "the flowering of all the world." What a Puritan turn he gives, in *Walden,* to his Rousseauistic complaint that, while civilization has been making our houses better, she has not made better their occupants! The occupants are not to blame other occupants, but to repent of their ways and resolutely set about improving themselves. In his own life Thoreau's sense of character was unfailing: in his reading, in his writing, in his dealings with others, in his dealings with himself. It is safe to say history records no man more honest in his dealings with others—honest to a degree that nearly forbade intercourse, as all his friends testify. And despite inevitable self-deceptions, he did his best to be honest with himself, to know his weaknesses and to remove them, to make his notch on his character every day, as he says, like Robinson Crusoe on his stick. He held close to his heart his favorite scrap of verse:

"Unless above himself he can
Erect himself, how poor a thing is man."

His imagination he put into the service of character from the days of his youth, "when the vision forms before our eyes," devoting his life to the realization of this vision—that it was ethical and spiritual may be assumed from his boyhood career and his deliberate self-education at college, as well as from his *Journal* in the earlier years. There is, for instance, the entry from which I have already quoted, entitled "Self-

Culture": "Who knows how incessant a surveillance a strong man may maintain over himself,—how far subject passion and appetite to reason, and lead the life his imagination paints?" Here, very plainly, the imagination is not engaged in erecting a dream world of sensation under the goading of passion or will, but is picturing a real world accordant with reason, delineating true humanity.[1] In an early manuscript, *The Service: Qualities of the Recruit,* a humble *Faerie Queene,* he refers to "the golden mean in ethics," a doctrine of reason, and presently gives its imaginative counterpart:

> "The brave man is a perfect sphere, which cannot fall on its flat side and is equally strong every way. The coward is wretchedly spheroidal at best, too much educated or drawn out on one side and depressed on the other. . . . We shall not attain to be spherical by lying on one or the other side for an eternity, but only by resigning ourselves implicitly to the law of gravity in us [he had spoken above of the golden mean as "the center of the system and that about which all revolve"] shall we find our axis coincident with the celestial axis."

Though it is too much to say that Thoreau himself attained sphericity, it is patent that he had a clear vision of the "all-round" man of the Greeks, with a Puritan moral earnestness in working to achieve the vision. And he approached it more nearly than is ordinarily supposed, with his fine senses, physical dexterity, familiarity with natural fact, knowledge of the great traditions of civilization, moral energy, imagination, fancy, humor, wit, temperamental pungency, logic, and insight, all of them given order and direction by the most human of human qualities, the inner voice that places us "on the pinnacle of humanity."

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[1] Thoreau's imagination at its best thus belongs, not to the type represented by Shelley, but to that represented by Milton, aiming to realize in himself "a composition and pattern of the best and honorablest things" as these have been revealed by "the highest wisdom . . . in every age."

§ 3

As for his relation to his fellow men, it must be held against him that he was inveterately self-centered. In his devotion to discipline, character, culture, in which his first aim was always to master what he termed the art of life, that is, truly to live, his method was incessantly to watch his own thoughts—"To observe what transpires, not in the street, but in the mind and heart of me!" He watched his mind as a cat watches a mouse hole; and when the thought or feeling ventured forth, he pounced upon it with a skill born of long practice, and recorded it in his journal that night, and there it reposed, one more bit of authentic life won from chaos. He cared far too little for the actual life of men. Events, even the largest, were insignificant if they transpired outside his private universe—Europe and Asia scarcely existed for him, though the American slavery struggle, which touched upon his life at Concord, roused him to incidental activity, and the Union defeat at Bull Run exhilarated him because he felt it involved the moral regeneration of the nation. But in the main he was indifferent to the fact that he could live most truly by bringing "the street," the general life of his contemporaries, into relation with his private universe. His contemporaries committed the error of living exclusively in the street, and therefore, he concluded illogically, he must go to the other extreme of living exclusively in his mind and heart.

This is not to say that he lacked a profound love of humanity. If he did not, with Whitman, immerse himself in the currents of feeling and thought of his own day, or share Whitman's easy comradeship with his fellows; if he had not Whittier's desire to dedicate his life to the noble causes of humanity in his time, it does not follow that he cared less than they for the good of man. Indeed, it was not his carelessness of man's good but the precise opposite, his passion for it, that made him denounce so bitterly the society into which he was born and to assume the part of the gadfly stinging it into virtue. Even in the essays of Emerson, arch-optimist of American literature, there are comments on the life of men as harsh as any in *Walden*. Thoreau, devoid of Emerson's optimism, is nearly always harsh. Yet he had, quite as definitely as Emerson, the Christian sense of the divinity of man, of the vestal fire of the temple (as he calls it) which never goes out. "In the meanest," he says with Emerson, "are all the materials of manhood, only they are not rightly disposed." If his sense of the potentiality of men lacks the vividness—and exaggeration—of Emerson's view, his sense of the inalienable divinity of men is quite as strong. He agreed with Emerson, again, in his conception of the practical consequences of this perception of the divinity within, holding that "What is called charity is no charity, but the interference of a third person. . . . Shall I defraud man of the opportunities which God gave him, and so take away his life?" It is a hard doctrine, differentiating

Thoreau and Emerson sharply from the Quaker Whittier, with his Christian humanitarianism, and from Whitman and most of the European romanticists, with their emotional humanitarianism.

We shall look in vain, then, in Thoreau as in Emerson, for that expansive sympathy with all men that is typical of the modern democratic era; nor shall we find the emphasis on the love of the sexes that is interwoven, like a scarlet thread, in the romantic web from Rousseau to Browning and the writers of our own day. The absence of these passions is evident in the rarefied atmosphere that one breathes with Emerson, and the chilly aloofness of Thoreau. They are incompletely human. Yet we must not forget that, unlike the followers of Rousseau, they have worked their way to the true center of humanity, unconfused by the clamorous voices of conflicting desires that tend to distort or destroy the vision. Both of them perceived, if intermittently, the center, the One, that rests while all else is restless. In friendship more easily than in love is the vision of the center attainable; their talent was not for romantic love but rather for classical friendship. Curiously enough, in this matter the usual relations of Emerson and Thoreau are reversed, for Emerson better illustrates friendship in practice and Thoreau in theory. Thoreau's failure in practice is the consequence of his success in theory—his conception, that is, was severely ideal and therefore humanly impossible of complete realization. His theory, essentially that of the classical philosophers, conceives the truest friendship as a relation between the good in one with the good in another: "We may then worship moral beauty without the formality of a religion."

Frowning upon romantic sympathy and pleasure in uniqueness of personality, he asserts that we must free our relation of these and substitute for them universality, a love of that impersonal unity of spirit which alone truly unites men.

The experience of the race would seem to show that his ideal was sound; but unhappily Thoreau, with his moral inflexibility, his uncompromising insistence on the highest, could not be content with the high tablelands of friendship where wise men have lived and from which they have looked to the heights. Secretly, too, perhaps, he enjoyed his temperamental acerbity, the chestnut bur of his outer nature that made him so hard to handle. He returned from his friendly excursions defeated and dispirited; and rejected alike by the elusiveness of nature and the want of perfect truth in men, he took refuge within himself. He would be frankly introspective, not in the bad sense of being solicitous of the welfare and personal phenomena of Henry David Thoreau, but in the good sense of realizing his true self, which was not his at all, but the divinity in man. He would find God by contemplation, somewhat like the Greeks and the Hindus, whom he admired, and not by a "shocking and passionate" repentance like that of the Hebrews, whom he disparaged. He would watch for intuitions, those "bright shoots of everlastingness" of Vaughan's poem, which alone could acquaint him with his innermost life. He felt that he could not always be in a state of contemplation, and he liked external things too well to be an abstracting Hindu, but the tenor of his days is expressed well enough when he writes, "It is a great relief when for a few moments in the day we can retire to our chamber and be completely true to ourselves. It leavens the rest of our hours." A perpetual self-recollection, in all humility, and a perpetual endeavor to charge the moment, the present moment, with the gains of self-recollection—so, and so only, Thoreau felt, might he truly know life. It does not embody all of the wisdom of Christianity, but it may well prove, on a close examination, to embody more of it than do all the humanitarian dreams of the Shelleys and Whitmans of his century.

§ 4

If we apply Saint-Beuve's method to Thoreau by studying him through his disciples, we shall be brought to the conclusion that he was an anchorless poetic soul drifting in the life of nature and passively imbibing her divinity; fervidly worshiping Nature "for her own sake" (whatever that may mean), and spurning everything that is distinctively human. It has been the ill fortune of Thoreau, as of Emerson, to be most seriously misunderstood by those who have most needed to understand him—his many imitators. Huxley remarked of Newman that one could extract from his writings a veritable book of infidelity; similarly, one could find in Thoreau's writings good reason for regarding him primarily as a misanthrope or a "lover of Nature" or almost anything else. But unless our analysis of this many-sided and enigmatic man is wide of the mark, it is clear that at bottom he was more nearly an exponent of humanism than of naturalism. It is true that he made external nature the object of his tireless study, and kept a journal, now published in fourteen volumes, that is little more than a record of a naturalist and an amateur naturalist at that, though it was intended as the record of his "joy," "ecstasy," "inspiration," "thought." Of these there is little more than a trace after the fourth or fifth volume; it becomes progressively objective and—to be quite candid—meaningless. The contrast with Emerson's *Journals* is complete. And yet, devoted to the study of nature as he was, he had, like Emerson, an abiding sense of the universal in man such as one can hardly match in his time, a conception of the spiritual life that perhaps transcends in profundity and elevation (but certainly not in expression) anything to be found in the European romantic movement, including Wordsworth. In comparison with Emerson, moreover, it may be said of him that, if his insight into the life of the spirit is less penetrating and more wavering than Emerson's, he yet had a reliance upon dialectic that relates him more certainly to the unquestionable facts of life and an instinct for discipline not to be found in the one genuinely "beautiful soul" in Concord. Outwardly far less attractive than Emerson, he shaped for himself a character in some respects nobler, a character summed up by one of his intimates, Channing, in lines endorsed by another close friend, Sanborn:

"Modest, mild and kind,
Who never spurned the needing from thy door,—
(Door of thy heart, which is a palace gate;)
Temperate and faithful, in whose word the world
Might trust, sure to repay; unvexed by care,
Unawed by Fortune's nod, slave to no lord,
Nor coward to thy peers; long shalt thou live!

Not in this feeble verse, this sleeping age,—
But in the roll of Heaven, and at the bar
Of that high court where Virtue is in place."

No one can read these lines without perceiving that, in his character as in his utterances, Thoreau brought together much that is perennially vital in the leading traditions of the Western world—the classical and the Christian—at the very time when they were being assailed with all the weapons of modern science and of the natural man bent on utter emancipation, and he did this, oddly enough, while seeking "to find God in nature." His relative failure in this quest, and his fresh perception of the residuum of truth in the old traditions, are of the deepest interest in our own day, when men are not only questioning the old traditions but also beginning to question the two mighty forces that assailed these traditions—the forces of science and romanticism.

CHAPTER V

LOWELL

§ 1

What The Wakes was to Gilbert White of Selborne, Elmwood was to Lowell. If he traveled farther than White, he traveled not much oftener, and returned to his home if anything even more eagerly. "I like Cambridge better than any other spot of the earth's surface," he wrote to his friend Norton, then abroad. When he himself was abroad he was often unhappy with a sense of homesickness—an oppressive emptiness of the heart that could not be relieved by social intercourse or by travel. "I shall not overstay my two years by a single day if I can help it," he wrote in 1873 while abroad preparing for his Harvard professorship. He felt like an exile when in Italy, and as he passed into Germany was elated at the sight of northern vegetation—firs and pines and mountain ashes. Nor was he really happy in France and Germany: "The buttercups stare at me as a stranger and the birds have a foreign accent. I'll be hanged but the very clouds put on strange looks to thwart me." Once back in Massachusetts, he was not satisfied unless he could stay at Elmwood; writing from Southborough he said: "I am one of those men who depend greatly on the kind offices of the *genius loci,* and am a good while in winning the confidences of a new one. I am just getting on speaking terms with the shy little fellow who has charge of the hills and pastures and woodpaths here," and he fears that he cannot write in the alien land of Boston—only three miles from his Elmwood! Writing to Thomas Bailey Aldrich, who was occupying Elmwood in 1873, he warned him: "It will make a frightful conservative of you before you know it. It was born a Tory and will die so. . . . I often wish I had not grown into it so. I am not happy anywhere else."

In his love of home, Lowell was a typical New Englander of his time. Emerson was firmly planted in Concord, Thoreau lost his intimacy with nature when he left his native village, Longfellow belonged to his adopted town, Holmes loved Boston as Dr. Johnson loved London. But Lowell's love was far more definite—it was not his village, but his house that was indispensable to his existence. One can imagine his consternation when fire attacked it, fortunately without serious results. And unquestionably the Elmwood of his day was worthy of affection. The house itself is roomy, and comely enough, and even to-day the surroundings are pleasant. But fifty years ago, when Cambridge was still scarcely more than a village, the fields roundabout had not yet been disturbed and the marshes still afforded crops of hay. From the upper windows one could see the broad pasture lands extending to the elms and spires of the town, and to the right the Charles quietly curving through salt marshes, with a mast or two at the edge, and Corey's Hill a mile back. Not far behind the house lay Fresh Pond, blue or gray as the sky willed, imbedded in green woods and piny fields. English elms, walnuts, buttonwoods, pines, cherry trees, smoke trees, and many others surrounded the house, giving it in summer "a cool and rustling privacy of leaves," filled with birds and bird-song—orioles, robins, jays, catbirds, and countless others—and the perfume of honeysuckle, roses, sweet peas, and lilac bushes. Here he enjoyed transparent northwesterly days in early summer, the haze and color of autumn, driving fog and rain laden with the salt of the sea, landscapes of virgin snow still and shining under the full moon.

A study of Lowell's attitude toward nature is thus concerned chiefly with the gentle country surrounding Elmwood. He spent some time on the Massachusetts coast, in Maine, in the Adirondacks, in the West, in Italy, and in England. More than once he accompanied Leslie Stephen to Land's End; ten or more summers he whiled away at Whitby, the watering-place of the North. But mountains and seashore, after all, meant little to him. He had in many ways an eighteenth-century love of nature; for nature dominated by man gave him as much delight as he craved, and the "mountain gloom" and the solitude of the ocean seemed to repel him. In his poetry he employed the ocean often; but it was always the ocean from the shore, to him the only fit place for real enjoyment of it, as he has indicated in the opening sentence of his Italian journal. To be sure, he wrote to a friend, "We seaboard fellows cannot live long without snuffing salt-water." But the sea as thus detected at Elmwood, or at best the sea as he knew it at the Isles of Shoals, amply sufficed him: in mid-ocean he was frankly bored.

Of the four seasons, Lowell was most fond of summer, especially early summer, when "the trees are all alive with the west wind" and the birds are singing and nesting in them. Spring was too fickle, perhaps too sentimental, for him; autumn invited moods and preluded decay. Winter he liked, however—the buffeting wind, the misty, dancing multitudinous snowfall and the refulgent fields when the sun blazed from a pale sky. He wrote an elaborate defense of winter—forgetting, perhaps, that English are not American winters. He treated autumn in "An Indian-Summer Reverie." But summer—June particularly—he celebrated again and again, most notably in "Sir Launfal" and "My Garden Acquaintance." From these facts we may corroborate an impression received from a reading of Lowell's poems—that he was most fond of the part of the year when nature is at her "high-tide." He did not seek inspiration on the ocean or in mountainous country, where nature rules man, nor did he seek it in the subtleties of spring and autumn; his predilection was for a humanized landscape replete with light and vivacity. Joy is the effect produced on him by nature, a "pagan sensuousness" commonly devoid of thought or aspiration. To enter into the joy of nature was his desire, to luxuriate in the sunshine, to feel the soft lapping of the summer breeze coming over the meadows with the fragrance of buttercups and clover and the tinkling rapture of the bobolink. He was the poet of June.

If we turn to the particular objects of nature treated in his poetry—the birds, trees, flowers, insects, and the like—we shall see that he was fondest of trees, singularly thoughtless and healthy creatures, and of birds, joyous and tuneful beings that live in healthy trees.

The flowery meadows about Elmwood were, of course, full of insects, butterflies especially; yet in all his poetry I find but two references to butterflies, one in the service of a moral, the other, a yellow butterfly, in the service of a picture. The cricket, an incessant chirper of these same meadows, receives a bonus of three words: "The cricket chirps." The cicada, though prominent in Cambridge from July to November, he mentions but twice, under the vulgar name of "locust." The dragon-fly fares a little better; he gets a simile "Though Love's May time be as brief as a dragon-fly's repose," and the blue "swamp-fly" occurs twice. The firefly is even more fortunate. In addition to several brief descriptions, Lowell uses this fitfully gleaming wanderer in a poem on anthropomorphism; the firefly does not so much as question that the lightning flashes of the sky "Are made, a fool could understand, By some superior kind of fly." Finally, "the buccaneering bee" buzzes in the lilies, clover, and linden-trees of every volume—in all seventeen times, four times as often as his nearest insect rival. In general, then, the insects of Elmwood eluded Lowell's observation. Like most people, he observed closely only what interested him, and his love of nature was not particular enough to arouse a unique delight in each species of insect. Only the firefly and dragon-fly seem to have attracted his more particular attention. He did not, apparently, care to peep and entomologize. As for the bee, despite his constant use of this insect, it is clear that he had no comradeship with it; very likely he used it so often because it is a conventional subject of similes in English classical poetry.

The small fur-bearing animals of Elmwood do not occur often in Lowell's poetry. There is a "slow water-rat" in one of the early poems, and a stanza-long chipmunk in the "Indian-Summer Reverie." But there are no woodchucks, weasels, moles, and what is more surprising, no squirrels. The electric twitches which the red squirrel can put into his tail should have won Lowell's esteem; but then, as he recorded in "My Garden Acquaintance," the squirrel is inclined to look twice at birds' eggs.

Although a trained botanist could have named a host of wild flowers in the Elmwood country of that day, only a relatively small number of them blossom fitfully in Lowell's poetry. Typical New England flowers are rare: there are the pond-lily, dandelion, buttercup, clover, daisy, aster, bloodroot (sanguinaria seemed more poetic), hardhack, goldenrod, succory, and a few others, but most of these are mentioned only once. The glory of late summer in New England, goldenrod, occurs only in a brief list of flowers, and then perhaps merely to supply a rhyme for "sod." The dandelion is favored with a poem of that name, a poem of considerable merit; yet I have a lurking suspicion that Lowell is here the critic, or the advocate, saying "a good word" for a pestilential weed, a suspicion given weight by his almost utter neglect of the flower elsewhere. Lowell's only genuine love among the flowers is, I think, the buttercup. It symbolizes June; it brims over with the fulness of summer, shines brilliantly, and plays with the breezes. The counterpart of the bee among the flowers is the rose, a favorite in classical poetry and Lowell's regular recourse when he wants a flower figure. Even more constantly do we find the violet, a conventional flower in romantic poetry, which appropriately enough decorates most notably Lowell's early and romantic verse—six times in his first eighty pages and in the five hundred later pages only six times more. Lowell's knowledge of flowers was manifestly limited, and his use of them rarely individual. With the trees and birds of his poetry it is otherwise.

Lowell might well have found six or eight trees sufficient for his not very considerable body of nature poetry, yet he used more than twenty—eighteen in the first volume alone. Though he ordinarily refrained from giving exact names, he mentioned not only pines, but yellow pines, not only oaks, but swamp, red, and scrub oaks. The tree of transcendental New England, the white pine, looms up mournfully again and again, now singing "old songs of the brine," now shedding its needles profusely and silently. "Pine-dark solitudes, with soft brown silence carpeted" he invaded when he sought the Muse, just as Emerson and Thoreau did. But it is a significant fact that he used the pine as often in the first volume of his collected poems as in all his remaining work together; it was naturally the tree, just as the violet was the flower, of his more sentimental years:

"Pines, ef you're blue, are the best friends I know.
They mope an' sigh an' sheer your feelin's so."

Later he devoted one entire poem "To a Pine-Tree" which had impressed him on his trip to the Moosehead country:

"Far up on Katahdin thou towerest,
Purple-blue with the distance and vast."

Though very little of this lyric is spontaneous, the last two stanzas are interesting, in their still, pictorial intensity, as showing Lowell at his closest to the wilder aspects of nature—to the majesty of the pine on the mountain crest:

"Thou alone know'st the splendor of winter,
Mid thy snow-silvered, hushed precipices,
Hearing crags of green ice groan and splinter,
And then plunge down the muffled abysses
In the quiet of midnight.

"Thou alone know'st the glory of summer,
Gazing down on thy broad seas of forest,
On thy subjects that send a proud murmur
Up to thee, to their sachem, who towerest
From thy bleak throne to heaven."

But, after all, Lowell was not mystical enough, in the naturalistic way, for a true love of the white pine: his intimate trees were rather the elm and birch. Unlike the pine, the elm is mentioned as often in the last volume as in the first: Lowell never tired of the tree that graced and named his house. Now his emphasis is on the leaves "dark and dewy," now on the "elm's straight stem," again on the general effect, when he sees the moon

"Through leaf-fringed abbey-arches of the elms
Curve her mild sickle in the West."

He loved the elm somewhat as he loved the rich arches of a Gothic cathedral, and in a more personal way as the home of his spirited orioles. But though the elm recurs constantly in his poetry, it was perhaps too close to him to win the prominence given the birch. Mentioned but thrice in all his poetry (the elm was used twelve times), the birch yet received a liberal share of his imagination and fancy. Lowell was seldom more sympathetic than when he wrote the phrase "its tremulous hair," and the entire poem called "The Birch-Tree." In that poem the birch is given a lasting place in American literature; save in bits of verse here and there Lowell never surpassed the second and third stanzas. Lowell's acquaintance with the trees of the Elmwood country was, then, at once extensive and intimate. Their size, their permanence, their swaying branches and rippling leaves, their fulness of life, attracted him far more than the humble flowers of his neighborhood, and less only than the birds.

In "My Garden Acquaintance" Lowell mentioned forty-one birds. The emphasis on birds in this essay is due, however, not only to the fact that they are more prone to wander into gardens than alien flowers and trees, but also to the fact that Lowell was fonder of them than of the inanimate objects of the natural world. In his poems he mentioned forty-two species (a half-dozen of them English, however). Though I have not seen a catalogue of Wordsworth's birds, I suspect that in his many volumes he found use for a number considerably below forty-two. A significant inference presents itself: whereas Wordsworth was interested, not so much in the names and ways of birds and flowers as in the emotions roused by natural objects in general, or by any natural object, Lowell, in the mood of the amateur naturalist or of the critic, was interested in names and ways as well as in emotions. In the first volume of his poems alone I find seventeen birds (many of them several times); and the remaining twenty-five flutter in at short intervals in his later work. He was never at a loss for the proper bird in a given picture or figure of speech. Had he written four more volumes, I dare say a fair number of newcomers would have sung for us. He used not only the conventional birds of poetry and the everyday birds of the farmer's acquaintance, but also species unknown save by those who look for them; not only swans, larks, and robins, but also chewinks, chickadees, cliff-swallows, coots, sparrow-hawks, wood-thrushes, and hermit-thrushes, while in his Elmwood essay he named as old friends cross-bills, rose-breasted grosbeaks, tree-sparrows, Wilson's thrushes, pewees, and cliff-, bank-, barn-, and chimney-swallows. In range, therefore, Lowell's observation of birds was rather unusual: and he was not wanting in accuracy or sympathy. In early summer, when some of the late migrants have not yet passed on to their nesting grounds, he watches a retired bird:

> "Through the dim arbor, himself more dim,
> Silently hops the hermit-thrush,
> The withered leaves keep dumb for him."

Nowhere else in American literature do we see so perfectly

> "The bluebird, shifting his light load of song
> From post to post along the cheerless fence."

Indeed, what chiefly made Lowell's observation so accurate was his sympathy. As I have already remarked, he loved light and vivacity in nature—the flooding light that makes early June in New England memorable, the vivacity of wind-enlivened trees and of incessantly active birds. He cared less for the "tranced summer-nights" of Keats, when

> "Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars,
> Dream and so dream all night without a stir"

than for rapturous summer days when the willow, "friend of all the winds,"

> "Glints his steely aglets in the sun,
> Or whitens fitfully with sudden bloom
> Of leaves breeze-lifted."

Similarly, he cared less for the ethereal chanting of our thrushes than for the confused, ecstatic music of the thrasher, catbird, and bobolink. In England he turned traitor for a time, insisting that the nightingale and blackbird "beat any of ours"—traitor to our birds, not to the sort of song he liked—but back at Elmwood he usually held the bobolink "the best singer in the world, even undervaluing the lark and the nightingale in the comparison"; "that liquid tinkle of theirs is the true fountain of youth if one can only drink it with the right ears, and I always date the New Year from the day of my first draught." Everything in spring is prelusive to the bobolink, and summer has lost its crowning glory when he becomes silent. Yet for some reason the bobolink occurs but five times in Lowell's poetry. Second in his esteem is the oriole; in every one of ten cases it is associated with the elms that stood guard along the lane. He envied the oriole its happy life in the elm-tops, and admired its "note, rich as the orange of his throat." The catbird was another favorite, who sang delightfully in the syringa thicket—a "seasonticket" to his music affords the rhyme; but he suffered in comparison with Calderon, who sang "a music of all moods and climes." The phœbe (actually the pewee?) though he gets a whole poem all to himself, was, I think, no favorite of Lowell's. That poem was written abroad; it voices his homesickness, an estimable but ineffectual emotion as Lowell expressed it; the phœbe's song, echoing in his memory, is rife

"With longings unappeased, and tears
Drawn from the very source of life"—

and the longings and tears of Lowell are somehow insipid and uncomely and unworthy. At home he seems to have heard the bird's petulant, melancholy call with more composure. The robin and swallow Lowell used frequently in his poetry, but rarely with enthusiasm; the former seemed to him a sober philistine, the latter, I fancy, a finely sailing bird, unfortunately almost songless. The chickadee, a brave and gentle little fellow loved by Emerson and Thoreau, surely visited Elmwood every day for whole weeks annually, perhaps nested on Lowell's property; yet he failed to mention him in "My Garden Acquaintance," and found a niche for him in only a line and a half of all his poetry. There he is "the hidden chickadee." Lowell freely bestowed his affection, it seems, only on such birds as the fiery, darting oriole, and "that devil-may-care, the bobolink," who swooped and poured forth music in the sunny fields.

§ 2

Lowell had had his training in what he termed "the great school of the senses." Born in the country, he lived there, roughly speaking, all his life. The wide fields, the green woods of "Sweet Auburn," the meandering Charles, were his daily surroundings, and they encouraged in him early, not merely an interest in the ways of nature but also a deep love of her. Endowed with the power of spontaneous expression, idealistic by inheritance and the contagion of great literature, he had the means of poetic composition. Besides, poetry was in the air: throughout New England, particularly about Boston, men, women, and children were freely opening their hearts; his own wife was a poetess; "The Band," a crew of youthful poetasters of whom he was one, read and wrote verses in the romantic manner with a species of soul-hunger not always affected. There was every encouragement for Lowell to engage in the gentle craft of verse-making.

In 1840, just after reaching manhood, he published his first volume, *A Year's Life,* a volume thin in more senses than one. Most conspicuous in it are maudlin forevermores, weary seas, moaning pines, dear violets, portentous moons, longing for the days of childhood, revolt against silken bards, a sense of "loving God's dear power," and blocks of moralizing wedged in here and there to give a more distinct uplift. Although nature is the theme or background of most of the poems, he never writes of her with sustained spontaneity.

Between 1840 and 1848 Lowell published a considerable amount of verse. Subjects so romantic and diverse as Brittany, Prometheus, the Chippewa tribe, Freedom, Columbus, Hunger and Cold, the Pine-tree, the Past, the Future, the Present Crisis, an Indian-Summer Reverie, the Birch-tree, the Dandelion, Longing, France, Lamartine, and Sir Launfal engaged his interest in these years. All three of Lowell's passions —patriotism, books, and nature—are here exemplified. Such Rousseauistic themes as brotherhood, freedom, innate goodness, and impassioned recollection are all distinct, and the idea of the golden age of childhood, in a Wordsworthian guise, is already dwelt upon frequently. Nature receives more attention and genuine feeling in these years than before or after. The pine tree is no longer the forlorn Ossianic symbol of the early poems. "An Indian-Summer Reverie," though often diffuse and turgid, contains many passages in which the emotion is crystallized and rings true. The dandelion poem is attractive if not stirring. The birch-tree lines are perhaps the best of a meditative sort that Lowell ever wrote. The two preludes of Sir Launfal, truthful and poetic descriptions of nature in New England, are, significantly, better than the narrative itself.

In the years of his maturity Lowell wrote his most individual work, such as the "Fable for Critics," the "Biglow Papers," and his most notable achievement in verse, the "Harvard Commemoration Ode." Nature now became subordinate: "Under the Willows," "Pictures from Appledore," "A Mood," "The Fountain of Youth," "Sunthin' in the Pastoral Line," "The Nightingale in the Study," "The Nest," "Phœbe," and "The Maple" are not remarkable in quantity or quality as the product of the second half of a lifetime. More and more Lowell was turning to occasional and patriotic themes; and even when he wrote of nature it was no longer the romantic nature of his lonely-sea period, nor the June and bobolinks and buttercups of his middle period, but, most often, the enigmatic world of the age of science and spiritual doubt, a world in which Lowell was signally ill at ease.

Taking the nature poetry of these three periods together, the amount is great enough to constitute Lowell a poet of nature, and the quality so high as to lead one of our most discriminating critics to concede the first place among American poets of nature to Lowell. The verdict is certainly disputable. Yet, even granting it to be just, we must ever ask, not why is Lowell's poetry of nature so excellent, but rather why is it not better? Rich in powers above all other American poets, always on the verge of high achievement, he gives us, as it were, his second best; and the second best, no matter how good it is, disappoints.

One reason for Lowell's relative failure lies in his practice as an artist. He insists, it is true, that no man ever lived who put into his verses more *conscience,* underscoring the word; he may be a bad poet, but he is a good versifier, for does he not write with ease, and has he not studied versecraft till he understands it "from beginning to end"? Like Carlyle, whom he resembled in more ways than one, he finds that his brain "requires a long brooding time ere it can hatch anything"; he gets an idea, which settles and clarifies, till he need only tap it and draw off the lees—not a bad method if rightly used. But though the *idée-mère* is delightful to him, he has "no pleasure in working it up." It flows easily, by virtue of his natural fluency, but it does not interest him. Most inadequately did Lowell know the joy of creation, of which elaboration is the main part. Like Carlyle, he was likely to "splash down" rather than compose. Bizarre words occur (such as "undisprivacied"), rough lines are common, and awkward or diffuse sentences and stanzas abound. The art of leaving out was strange to him. And if he lacked the habit of compressed and shapely utterance, he lacked also what might have mitigated the evil consequences—the art of revision. In his early and middle life he was notoriously careless; if later he gave more attention to his proofs, nevertheless so late as 1884 he wrote in a letter, "The great fault I am always taxing myself with is impatience of revision," and two years after, he wrote to Aldrich apropos of his "Credidimus": "Cut out what you please. There are two or three bright spots. If these be left, all will be well." All will be well! The Greeks would not have thought so, nor would Milton, nor Tennyson, nor any other true artist.

There is, however, a deeper reason for Lowell's inability to attain what he seemed capable of, a reason akin to that which explains Gray's relative failure—the paralyzing effect of the spirit of the times. He suffered a confusion of mind and heart from which he never extricated himself; although he changed, he failed to reach at any period of his life self-mastery, that concentration of his powers that alone could lend impact to his fine qualities. No man has prized sincerity more than he; yet an unconscious insincerity vitiates nearly all that he wrote, especially in his poetry. Once or twice, as in the "Harvard Commemoration Ode," written at white heat in two days, he attained unity with himself; but in general his verse droops through a hundred disquieting influences. He might have said of his poetry as he said of himself:

". . . I cannot fly;
My doubts enmesh me if I try,
Each lilliputian, but, combined,
Potent a giant's limbs to bind.
This world and that are growing dark;
A huge interrogation mark";

but the great poet must affirm, even while he doubts. "At least two thirds of Lowell's earlier poems," says Churton Collins, "have something of the air of falsetto," for a reason deeper than Collins suspected. It was not merely that, like all poets, in his youth he sat at the feet of a laureate fraternity; the point is that he sang their songs without inward conviction, and that later, when he had served his apprenticeship, he continued to sing without inward conviction. There is unquestionably an element of "romantic irony" in Lowell. He is inconsistent, not only outwardly, but in spirit. Heart and mind are never long at one.

Too often he seems to look down upon the play of emotion within him, condemning much that he does even while he does it. Referring to his essay on Carlyle, he wrote to Leslie Stephen that he was perhaps harder on him than he meant, because he was "fighting against a secret partiality." He is always fighting against secret partialities. He scorns Petrarch's sentimentalism, and Rousseau's (more mildly, for reasons to be considered presently), and sentimentalism in general; yet he had his own period of Wertherism and never completely freed himself from it. He admits that, in common with Petrarch, Dante, Tasso, and Byron, he was "desperately in love" before he was ten years old and suffered pangs beyond our comprehension. At the age of eighteen, he affected poetry like that of Byron and Campbell, which can "bring tears to one's eyes." When twenty years old, he was on the point of enacting the conclusion of the Werther melodrama, but was unable to pull the trigger. At some time in his early years he "was never a single night unvisited by visions." Tennyson's "Maud" made him, at the age of thirty-six, break down in the middle of the poem "in a subdued passion of tears." Once when sick late in life he lost all consciousness of his flesh and was mixed with the Milky Way. All these phenomena he was inclined to attribute to his conscience, handed down by his Puritan forbears (*ursa novanglica,* he calls them), though he might more plausibly have ascribed them to the *Zeitgeist.*

Feeling this weakness in himself, he denounced it all the more bitterly in others, as in his essay on the poet Percival. When the death of his wife stirred him to the depths he wrote, "I do abhor sentimentality from the bottom of my soul." Yet the "poetical temperament" fascinated him; for though he never failed to express his contempt for it and its sensitiveness and fondness for "unnoticed nothings," one feels below the surface an ever-recurrent secret partiality. A letter that he wrote in 1866 to Charles Eliot Norton—one of his most intimate correspondents—is worth quoting as illustrative of the shifting from heart to mind, the ebb and flow of impulse even as he wrote:

> "The older I grow the more I am convinced that there are no satisfactions so deep and so permanent as our sympathies with outward nature. I have not said just what I meant, for we are thrilled even more by any spectacle of human heroism. But the others seem to bind our lives

together by a more visible and unbroken chain of purifying and softening emotion. In this way the flowering of the buttercups is always a great and I may truly say religious event in my year. But I am talking too unguardedly. You know what a deep distrust I have of the poetical temperament, with its self-deception, its real unrealities, and its power of sometimes unblest magic, building its New Jerusalem in a sunset cloud rather than in a world of actuality and man."

The words "convinced," "religious event," "unguardedly," "distrust," and "self-deception" are especially suggestive. "How far can I trust myself?" sounds like an overtone in all his work; always the critical spirit, distinguishing and weighing, in his poetry as well as in his criticism, yet never the voice of the judge. On the one hand is a superficial spontaneity, that quality in him that Leslie Stephen called so well his "ineradicable boyishness" of spirit; on the other, an ineradicable distrust, a disunion never harmonized through the triumph of any principle of inner control. The religious outcome was a reliance on "motherly-tender" Earth; an inclination toward faith in the Rock of Ages; hatred of evolutionary science, combined with an impulse to accept it because it satisfied reason; and finally, a preference of the Anglican service. These elements are not uncommon among the poets of Lowell's century; but while others hastened from faith to faith, Lowell can scarcely be said to have attained any faith.

Fortunately he became less sentimental as the years went on, and freed himself from the danger of seeking refuge from his confusion in a world of dreams or in the cultivation of a cynical attitude, thanks to his lively sense of humor and to that "immense ballast of common sense" which he carried. In reading Grote on Greece, he finds his "prosy good sense . . . medicinal," his "honest incapacity of imagination . . . singularly soothing." Not in reverie nor in cynicism did Lowell seek refuge but in action. His very style is full of it. Writing to Holmes, whose life of Emerson he had just read, he commented as follows: "There are admirable things in the chapter about Emerson's poetry, many that made me *slap my thigh* with emphatic enjoyment. You say the book tired you, but I see no sign of it, and your *wind is firm* to the end. I thank you for helping me to a conclusion I was *fumbling for.*" That is scarcely the style of a dreamer in a perfumed tower of ivory. Physically, Lowell was as robust as a cab-driver—a comparison he would have relished. In his honeymoon days at Baltimore, he was so red-cheeked that it seemed to him he must have scraped all the brick walls in the city. Throughout his life he enjoyed fishing, sailing, and winter walks in the teeth of a gale; and for some years he went annually to the Adirondacks, where, according to Thoreau, he at least shot a bear. The possibility of an unearned increment in flesh vexed him into "three hundred strokes with a pair of twenty-four-pound dumb-bells every morning and evening"; nor did more spirited nightcaps fail to interest him. Those who knew him personally are agreed that he was tremendously alive, thoroughly wholesome, altogether manly. He was a man of action—a lover of outdoor exercise, a leader in the anti-slavery movement, Minister to Spain and England, and the most energetic reader among American men of letters.

Reading, indeed, was Lowell's main activity. He read incessantly, and for incredible stretches of hours; his library at Elmwood was a place consecrated to communion with the highest minds of literature. He knew the Classics, and read fluently French, German, Spanish, and Italian. Advising the young to select a single great writer and to master him, he himself may be said to have mastered Dante, Cervantes, Calderon, Chaucer, and Shakspere. He responded immediately and abundantly to excellence wherever he found it; with an unerring instinct he could find the delectable spots in the uneven fields of Dryden and the correct gardens of Pope, and, like Lamb, could relish a book that the uncharitable world pronounced stupid. Wherever he went he carried his bookishness with him, and even when he wrote on an unliterary subject his style was clogged with more or less recondite allusions.[1] Though he declared, "Books are good dry forage; we can keep alive on them; but, after all, men are the only fresh pasture"; and though he loved men and had admirable friendships, he unquestionably suffered from what De Quincey called "the gluttony of books." In "A Moosehead Journal" he remarked "how tyrannical the habit of reading is, and what shifts we make to escape thinking." Before writing a critical essay, he was willing to make it a practice to read through all that a man wrote, even when it amounted to twenty or thirty volumes, but he was singularly unwilling to think, or, if willing, unable. In the higher region of ideas, his intellect was nearly inert, for though he was inimitably deft and eager in his dealing with detail, he was quite unphilosophic. The most conspicuous humanistic scholar of the New England renaissance, he resembled many of the humanists of the Italian and Trans-Alpine Renaissance in his untiring study, his ardent love of books, his frequent insight in matters of detail, and his lack of the higher critical faculty. His reading afforded little more than recreation, though an exalted one; it did not conspicuously afford substance for reflection or contemplation on the values of life, and it certainly quite failed to enable him to know himself and the world. He was a bookworm at least in this sense, that reading was an end in itself, rather than a means to the attainment of wisdom as with Emerson and Thoreau, Carlyle and Arnold. Hence, if from one point of view we may say he "mastered" Dante, Calderon, and his other fixed stars, from a larger point of view we must confess that he never entered into their true meaning, since he never liberated himself from their texts, never learned to move with ease and certitude in the realm of the mind and the spirit. While Thoreau suffered from the tyranny of natural observation, Lowell suffered even more from the tyranny of reading; he was almost—to apply an epithet he bestowed on Cotton Mather—"book-suffocated."

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[1] In his nature essay, "My Garden Acquaintance," Lowell embellishes forty-one birds with forty-eight allusions.

§ 3

From his inner confusion Lowell sought refuge, not only in reading and other activities, but also in nature. Writing in middle age, he observes that he is "grateful for anything that renews in me that capacity for mere delight which made my childhood the richest part of my life. It seems to me as if I had never seen nature again since those days." Throughout his life, indeed, he looked back, in the manner of Wordsworth, on the sunny days of his childhood, when nature was frank and open and joyous. Even before he was of age he wrote "To Perdita, Singing":

> "Oh, sing them back, as fresh as ever . . .
> The sunshine and the merriment."

Later, the sight of the dandelion recalled the robin's song of his earliest years, an angel voice,

> "Fresh every day to my untainted ears."

The children are "the only rich"; they enjoy "wisely vacant days"—"wisely *vacant,*" not *wise* as in Wordsworth. In one of his latest poems, "The Oracle of the Goldfishes," he peers wistfully into his boyhood, when he—

> " . . . by no problem-debts distrest,
> Sate at life's board, a welcome guest.
>
> . . . .
>
> "O golden age, not yet dethroned!
> What made me happy, that I owned."

In several poems he declared that nature had not lost the glamour of his early years, while in his letters he spoke of the quieting, sustaining influence which, as he grew older, was taking the place of the old unthinking joy. It is clear that the latter assertion is closer to the truth. There were times, no doubt, when for a space he was a boy again—the bobolinks saw to that—but in general he was distrest with problem-debts, whatever that may mean.

No bird, he says, speaking of the bobolink, "seems to me so thoroughly happy as he, so void of all *arrière* *pensée* about getting a livelihood"—"he takes a thoughtless delight in present sunshine."[1] His heart went out, not to the meditative hermit-thrush, anchorite of the pine wood, but to the bobolink, joyous reveler over fields of clover. He hated heartily the *arrière pensée* forced upon him by nineteenth-century rationalism, for somehow the theory of evolution interfered with his pleasure in the song of birds and the silent shimmer of the moon on the river. Now, June came nearer the mood of childhood than any other month, and helped him to momentary forgetfulness of problem-debts; so June became Lowell's month. The fulness of early summer gratified him beyond anything else; "filled up," "run o'er," "brimmed o'er" are regular verbs with him, "heaven's cup" he drank in "supernaculum" fashion. He preferred, not the gloom of the evening, or the mystery of night, or the chill, creeping fogs of early spring, but light and vivacity—clear blueness and greenness and free action, buoyancy, enthusiasm.

Sometimes a mood not so much that of the child, as of the romantic poet, came upon him. We find in Lowell, here and there, expressions of the modern desire to melt into nature, to confuse body and soul and the outer world in spiritual union. More than once he lay on the warm earth under the willow,—

> " . . . gathering virtue in at every pore
> Till it possessed me wholly, and thought ceased,
> Or was transfused in something to which thought
> Is coarse and dull of sense. Myself was lost,
> Gone from me like an ache, and what remained

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[1] The contrast with Emerson's and Thoreau's cult of the present moment is obvious.

Became a part of the universal joy.
My soul went forth, and, mingling with the tree,
Danced in the leaves."

But he never seemed sure that the experience was spiritual, as indeed it probably was not. The pseudo-mystical note in Lowell's poetry is incidental and inappropriate; not immersion in nature's spirit, not enlightenment through reverie, was Lowell's object in his intercourse with nature, but the thoughtlessness and keen sensuous delight of childhood. He would have days of "right Chaucer." He is actually less akin to Wordsworth and Shelley, in his feeling for nature, than to that brave, glad spirit of early England, even though his delight lacks Chaucer's substratum of confidence in life. He would forget that he lived in the dread shadow of evolutionary science; the fetish of protoplasm, he was tempted to call it—"I hate it," he said, "as a savage does writing." Within the cathedral at Chartres he experiences a religious moment; but

" . . . then it all came back,
This age that blots out life with question-marks,
This nineteenth century with its knife and glass
That make thought physical, and thrust far off
The Heaven, so neighborly with man of old,
To voids sparse-sown with alienated stars.
'Tis irrecoverable, that ancient faith."

He would evade, too, if he could, the introspection of romanticism, that "melancholy liver-complaint" of "our self-exploiting nineteenth century," which he attacked in his literary essays again and again, not even sparing his beloved Wordsworth and his neighbor Thoreau and, for that matter, the whole New England Transcendental movement of which he was himself a part. And he would at times find oblivion from the conquests of the new Promethean spirit of democracy, all too indifferent of culture,

> ". . . This Western giant coarse,
> Scorning refinements which he lacks himself,"

and of reverence for the supernatural:

> ". . . lo, where his coming looms,
> Of Earth's anarchic children latest born,
> Democracy, a Titan who hath learned
> To laugh at Jove's old-fashioned thunderbolts,—
> Could he not also forge them, if he would?"

Science, romanticism, democracy—if he could not deny them, he could at least forget them in the gladness and repose of living nature. To sit on a fence and bask in the sun in the latter days of May was, he says, what he was born for. Yet he became the great humanistic scholar of our renaissance and an admirable exponent of American democracy.

For, much as he rejoiced in the recruiting influence of nature, he was vividly aware of the self-delusions that ensnare the seeker after truth and wisdom in the outer world. While Emerson and Thoreau, in their symbolical conception of nature, were inclined to invite communication between outer and inner, Lowell bluntly asserted that nature

> "Let us mistake our longing for her love,
> And mocks with various echo of ourselves.
> . . . .
> What we call Nature, all outside ourselves,

> Is but our own conceit of what we see,
> Our own reaction upon what we feel;
> The world's a woman to our shifting mood,
> Feeling with us, or making due pretence."[1]

It is true that he was content to leave some margin of doubt, to yield to Wordsworth, for instance, the praise of having defined and expressed "those faint and vague suggestions of other-worldiness of whose gentle ministry with our baser nature the hurry and bustle of life scarcely ever allowed us to be conscious," by virtue of "a depth of intuition which makes only the best minds at their best hours worthy, or indeed capable, of his companionship." Doubtless he was right, while denouncing the romantic love of nature, in conceding Wordsworth to be exceptional; an interpretation of life that altogether discredits Wordsworth is indeed dangerously rigid. Yet this president of the Wordsworth Society was anything but a blind disciple. In the same essay from which the above quotation is drawn, he writes,

> "His system of a Nature-cure, first professed by Dr. Jean Jacques and continued by Cowper, certainly breaks down as a whole. . . . I am not sure, indeed, that the Nature-cure theory does not tend to foster in constitutions less vigorous than Wordsworth's [implying, what is certainly true, that Wordsworth's nobility was not so much derived from nature as inherited and cultivated by humane discipline] what Milton would call a fugitive and cloistered virtue at a dear expense of manlier qualities.

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[1] "The Cathedral." Compare the passage on Rousseau's sentimental feeling for nature, *Prose Works,* II, 266–67. What is here a conviction, involving practical consequences, has with the romanticists rarely been more than an ironical suspicion.

> The ancients and our own Elizabethans . . . found surprisingly fine scenery in man and his destiny, and would have seen something ludicrous, it may be suspected, in the spectacle of a grown man running to hide his head in the apron of the Mighty Mother whenever he had an ache in his finger or got a bruise in the tussle for existence."

And in the essay on Thoreau, after diagnosing the nature cult of the day as liver-complaint, he remarks with an exasperation more justified now than when he wrote,

> "If matters go on as they have done, and everybody must needs blab of all the favors that have been done him by roadside and river-brink and woodland walk, as if to kiss and tell were no longer treachery, it will be a positive refreshment to meet a man who is as superbly indifferent to Nature as she is to him."

No, that way madness lies. If we were real men to-day, we should be content with the beauty and the recreative power of nature, and if we must love nature love her "where she most grandeur shows—in man."

§ 4

Prizing deeply the thoughtlessness and the childlike delight afforded by the abounding beauty and vitality of the outer world, combating what he regarded as a sentimental hankering after sympathy and wisdom in commerce with nature, Lowell turned deliberately to the human world for a sympathy and wisdom that could not be other than genuine and proper to his constitution. The wisdom won from intercourse with men, such wisdom as Montaigne's and Shakespere's, and the wisdom won from the inner self by one living among men, such wisdom as Dante's, are far more precious as well as delightful, Lowell says, than the dubious contributions of the non-human order. Yet, for all his active participation in the work of the world, his contact with students at Harvard, his wide acquaintance and warm friendships, his labors in the cause of the abolition of slavery, his intelligent interest in political affairs, and his services as ambassador in European capitals, to which he added his ardent studies in the wisdom of the past and his self-study and self-expression in verse and prose—notwithstanding all this, he never succeeded so well as the more cloistered Transcendentalists of Concord in drawing close to the center of humanity. He never clearly perceived in men or in himself any governing principle capable of giving order and purpose to human life, for lack of which his generous sympathies and imaginative powers were wont to deploy, so to speak, in a void. Like many men of his own epoch and of ours, he was vibrant with undirected sympathies. When he went out among his fellows, the indifference of passing strangers at times brought tears to his eyes. His letters are full of a wistful affection: "I *do* like to be liked," and again, "I would rather be loved than anything else in the world"—happily he *was* loved. As eager as Thoreau really to live, he found life not in solitude but in society, agreeing with his logger in the Maine woods: "We don't live none too long, anyhow; and without society a fellow couldn't tell more'n half the time whether he was alive or not." A son of the Puritans, he inherited a sturdy character, but he apparently valued more highly his lively sympathy:

> "I thank benignant nature most for this,—
> A force of sympathy, or call it lack
> Of character firm-planted, loosing me
> From the pent chamber of habitual self
> To dwell enlarged in alien modes of thought,
> Haply distasteful, wholesomer for that,
> And through imagination to possess,
> As they were mine, the lives of other men."

Perhaps the depreciation in this passage is excessive; perhaps his sympathy was more often than he knew the fulfillment of the law, of his latent inner rightness, rather than a substitute for it—in so far, certainly, it is entirely admirable. But it is clear enough from the tenor of his life and from his writings that he possessed a large fund of that diffused humanitarianism which was a leading characteristic of his age, a humanitarianism quite other than that which gave both fire and sweetness to his fellow abolitionist Whittier, or that which lurks in Emerson's conviction of the unity and boundless potentiality of all men, or that which lent to the statesman Lincoln his impressive serenity and power of achievement. In all three—Whittier, Emerson, Lincoln—the fervid humanitarianism of the times is stabilized and given a profound effectiveness by its foundation in an unwavering sense of man's ethical and spiritual unity.

To this perception of unity, in either its Greek or Christian aspect, Lowell never attained more than intermittently, and for it he tended to substitute, in accordance with the modern spirit, the treacherous unity of sympathy. It is always easy to be a poet of "Freedom," since men rightly detest nothing so much as external compulsion; it is hard, so hard that only the greatest poets have the power, to envisage the inner law without which so-called freedom is another slavery: *"Nur das Gesetz kann uns die Freiheit geben."* The hard task was beyond the accomplishment of Lowell, but the easy one he performed with a dignity and a passion that gave him a secure place among the American apostles of freedom and democracy. We have already noticed how he dreaded the mighty advances of Democracy, the brutal giant of this latter-day, because it threatened to engulf many of the finer values of civilization, æsthetic and spiritual, to which he, as a man "by temperament and education of a conservative turn," was strongly sensitive. Wavering in this matter as in others, Lowell viewed the changing world of his day with mixed feelings, as well he might. Yet nothing in his life does him greater credit than the brave spirit in which he welcomed this thing that he feared, the discernment and enthusiasm that he manifested in preaching the gospel to his countrymen and to Europe, and the admirable use of his critical faculties in warning us of the perils inherent in the movement. He was not a lukewarm, but an intelligent lover of democracy. Though undeviatingly aristocratic in his personal tastes, he boldly subscribed to the unpopular abolition cause, and though he could not at first see the underlying greatness of Lincoln, he became in time a firm supporter and the writer of the finest tribute to him in our literature, and could say with Lincoln's own accent, "An appeal to the reason of the people has never been known to fail in the long run." He went so far as to warm to the spirit of Rousseau, "the foster-father of modern democracy," whose idealism he found in the far-flung phrases of our Declaration of Independence. Aside from its tendency to materialism, indeed, he accepted democracy entirely, believing it essentially conservative. But he deemed solemnly ominous the communistic socialism that might find a fulcrum in it. Communism, he held, in cutting off "the very roots in personal character," militated against the cause of civilization:

> "Communism means barbarism, but Socialism means, or wishes to mean, coöperation and community of interests, sympathy, the giving to the hands not so large a share as to the brains, but a larger share than hitherto in the wealth they must combine to produce—means, in short, the practical application of Christianity to life, and has in it the secret of an orderly and benign reconstruction."

For the *method* of such a reconstruction he would refer us to the framers of the American Constitution, who recognized "the folly of breaking with the past," and "the value of tradition and habit as the great allies of permanence and stability." For the *spirit* of reconstruction, he would remind us, with the sages, of the dependence of freedom on culture and character and spiritual control:

> "I, Freedom, dwell with Knowledge: I abide
> With men whom dust of faction cannot blind
> To the slow tracings of the Eternal Mind;
> With men by culture trained and fortified,
> Who bitter duty to sweet lusts prefer,
> Fearless to counsel and obey."

Not in sympathy merely does Lowell find the cement of the new order slowly growing out of the old, but in sympathy based on self-restraint, Christian sympathy truly conceived and inflexibly applied. Where others were blind, he saw, however fitfully, the futility of an humanitarianism divorced from both the discipline of humanism and the discipline of religion; and if he himself too often drifted with the murky currents of sympathy characteristic of the modern era, and was unable to give definition and impressiveness to the law of inner control, if in all his criticism of himself and of his age he was incapable of mastery while sound at the heart and tending rightly, we can only say of him, as he said of Dryden, a kindred mind that he comprehended, "There are continual glimpses of something in him greater than he."

CHAPTER VI

WHITMAN

§ 1

In Walt Whitman of Long Island, the romantic spirit of the age, instead of being shaped by the restraints, in part humanizing, in part paralyzing, of New England Puritanism, was permitted to expand freely, till it embraced the whole of America—both its democratic society and its grandiose natural setting. Unlike Lowell, Emerson, Thoreau, Whittier, and Bryant, who breathed more or less alien air when they wandered beyond the confines of snug little New England, Whitman found himself at home in the Catskills, in New Orleans, in Missouri, in Colorado, on the Great Lakes, in Canada, in the neighborhood of Philadelphia. Twice in his life he made extensive trips: once when he went to New Orleans by way of the Ohio and the Mississippi and returned by way of Chicago and Niagara, and again when he spent sixteen weeks in ten thousand miles of Western travel, extending his journeys to the Rockies. With all that he saw he felt himself and his poems attuned. Himself, his poems, his America—were they not one?

Yet he was devoted with peculiar passion to the country of his birthplace, out of which, in a quite literal sense, he had grown. He is the poet of Long Island, his fish-shaped Paumanok, almost as truly as Thoreau is the poet of Concord and Walden. This is but another way of saying that he is what no other American poet, save perhaps Longfellow, can pretend to be, the poet of the sea. West Hills, the birth-place of Whitman, is on the highest land of Long Island, three miles from the Sound and a dozen miles from the Atlantic. At the age of four he was taken to Brooklyn, then a country village of 7000 inhabitants, with muddy, unlighted roads as streets. Clam-digging, fishing excursions, bathing, eel-catching, gathering sea-gulls' eggs, sailing along the shores amid the traditions of many wrecks, often to the eastern end of the Island, where he "spent many an hour on Turtle hill by the old lighthouse, on the extreme point, looking out over the ceaseless roll of the Atlantic"—such pleasures, together with walking inland, occupied the hours and days of his childhood, and gave him a peculiar intimacy with the dry uplands, the fragrant sedge-meadows, and the "passionless wet." This intimacy reappears again and again in *Leaves of Grass,* oftenest in the form of rhapsodical celebration, but often also in the form of scientifically accurate description. Although the essential Whitman was a poet, it is clear that he had not a little of the scientific spirit of his century.

§ 2

This is not to say that he was a naturalist to the manner born. In *Specimen Days* he writes, under the title "Birds—And a Caution," an out door note characteristic of a mystical lover of nature, beginning as it does with a record of birds seen, and concluding with a stout apology for failure to name other species. The mystic or the poet of nature is not likely to be a good naturalist: he observes, not so much the facts, the external phenomena, as the qualities that may be translated into terms of human emotion. A bird's song is less an approximation to music on the diatonic scale than a voice of nature which belongs to that bird peculiarly. Thoreau saw subtly rather than accurately; Lowell watched the birds of Elmwood sympathetically rather than closely; and Whitman, notwithstanding his friendship with Burroughs, was precise at one moment and heedless at the next. "I do not very particularly seek information," he says in the same note:

> "You must not know too much, or be too precise or scientific about birds and trees and flowers and water-craft; a certain free margin, and even vagueness—perhaps ignorance, credulity—helps your enjoyment of these things, and of the sentiment of feather'd, wooded, river, or marine Nature generally."

As a consequence one finds in Whitman's work frequent nondescript feathery things: "a" bird is singing, a sort of bird number A. Again, one may detect actual mistakes. The mocking-bird virtually never reaches Long Island—it is most improbable that Whitman ever heard of it there; yet he makes it the hero of one of his most intimate Paumanok poems, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." Down by Timber Creek of an afternoon late in June he hears a delightful "song-epilogue (is it the hermit thrush?)" at a time when the hermit is chanting pensively on the Presidential Range; and I strongly suspect that the hermit thrush of the memorable poem on the death of Lincoln is no other than the wood thrush. But, of course, Whitman was substantially right in his criticism—you must not be too precise or scientific.[1]

Nevertheless this large soul, "wandering and peering, dallying with all," had sufficient scientific interest—or call it a childish collecting instinct—to make lists of trees and flowers and birds. Of the three the bird-list is perhaps the most unusual. At the opening of May he noted over thirty species that he had observed about Timber Creek; a number hardly comparable with the one hundred or so which a trained ornithologist could have discovered, but still a number far greater than the average farmer ever names. It is a curious catalogue. A sub-list indicates the early birds, the first arrivals: some of them are not in the general list, the meadow-lark loses his hyphen, the high-hole becomes the flicker (another name for the same bird), and a Wilson's thrush enters demurely, as if the poet had been introduced to the whole thrush family—a possibility somewhat disturbed by his doubts as to the hermit of the song-epilogue.

But stranger than Whitman's interest in birds and plant life is his absorption in astronomy. Of what use are the names of the constellations to a full-fledged mystic? Part of his interest may be explained by the influence of a Mr. Whitall ("who posts me up about the stars")—but Walt was certainly ready enough to listen and to ask questions. Passages like the following are clearly no more than *tours de force,* executed for private joy, with a dim eye on the future reader:

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[1] Recent creative writers, in particular, have been prone to forget that the heart of literature consists in sound thought and feeling, not in accurate fact.

> "The moon in her third quarter—the clusters of the Hyades and Pleiades, with the planet Mars between—in full crossing sprawl in the sky the great Egyptian X (Sirius, Procyon, and the main stars in the constellations of the Ship, the Dove, and of Orion) just north of east Boötes, and in his knee Arcturus, an hour high."

Not from nature did Whitman learn this various language!

When we turn to his poetry, we find, on the whole, fewer birds and flowers and trees than we expect. Insects are celebrated—the little is as important to the mystic as the great—but rarely with any enjoyment of their queer conversation (to use an old and excellent word). There are ants and katydids and gnats and butterflies and bees, and even tumble-bugs rolling balls of dung; but only the bees occur with any frequency. Of miscellaneous animals (including snakes, fish, fur-bearers, etc.) Whitman employed a veritable menagerie: we see in turn the moose, the prairie-dog, sow, quahog, hyla, panther, alligator, bat, whale, buffalo, polar bear, walrus, herring, raccoon, stingray, and even a mastodon; yet few of these were more familiar to the poet than the baleful colossus at the end of the list.

With the trees of America Whitman was better acquainted. He names at intervals more than thirty varieties, including the yellow pine, sassafras, cottonwood, and hackmatack. Although he mentions the pines oftenest, his particular favorites were the cedar and the live-oak. The latter is the subject of a poem in the Calamus series: alone and mossy it stands in a wide flat place in Louisiana,—"uttering joyous leaves of dark green." He could not thrive so remote from his fellows:

". . . though the live-oak glistens there in Louisiana
solitary in a wide flat space,
Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover
near,
I know very well I could not."

It does not appear that Whitman knew many flowers, but so far as he mentioned them they are the varieties which he had reason to know well. He ignores the pretty posies of flower poetry—the violet occurs but twice, the arbutus once—and characteristically bestows his attention on the mullein, dandelion, and poke-weed. Of garden and dooryard flowers he admits only the two that were precious through reminiscence—white and red morning-glories and white and lavender lilacs. He emphasizes the delicate-colored blossoms of the latter, "with the perfume strong I love," set off by "heart-shaped leaves of rich green." Lilacs blooming in the dooryard occur in two poems other than "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Whitman always associated this flower with his childhood years on fish-shaped Paumanok; that is no doubt why he mentions it at least thrice as often as any other blossom.

But of the various phases of nature lore, Whitman was manifestly most interested in birds. They far outnumber the trees and flowers of *Leaves of Grass;* for no less than forty species appear in his catalogues or descriptive passages. Among them are such recondite creatures as the yellow-crowned heron, the snowy heron, the man-of-war bird (who, in a translation from the French, gets a poem all to himself), the redstart, the wood-duck, and the razor-billed auk. The hermit thrush occurs twice only, the "thrush" twice more.

With the exception of the spiritual thrush and the ecstatic mocking-bird (the brown thrasher is, possibly, the bird alluded to), Whitman's birds are mostly big and bold. "The hawk, the seagull," he says in *Old Age Echoes,* "have far more possess'd me than the canary or mocking-bird," on account of a distaste for warbling and trilling and a love of soaring "in the fulness of power, joy, volition." This attitude is abundantly supported by examples in *Leaves of Grass.* The hawk is a great favorite, the eagle sails aloft when the buzzard is not there; one finds also many gulls, herons, partridges, owls, and wild turkeys. It was only in Whitman's later summers, spent out-of-doors in New Jersey, that he was attentive to the smaller birds and their songs. Then he listened regularly to "copious bird-concerts" at sunrise and sunset, finding the sunset music "more penetrating and sweeter—seem'd to touch the soul." To the robin he usually attributed a "reedy" note or trill; yet he had been "trying for years to get a brief term, or phrase, that would identify and describe that robin-call."

Whitman combined, as few poets have combined, a love of both the gentler and the wilder aspects of nature. The quiet pastoral country of New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania, and the boundless prairies and treeless mountains of the West were equally attractive to him. Born and bred on a large island, with clover and winding lanes and "cow-processions" about him and the moody ocean rolling its waves to the shore almost within hearing distance, he learned to love both pastoral and wild nature. The farmer constantly reappears in his poetry, and often enough "A Farm Picture" little inferior to the following:

"Through the ample open door of the peaceful country barn,
A sunlit pasture field with cattle and horses feeding,
And haze and vista, and the far horizon fading away—"

which is at once quietly colored and skilfully composed.

But however often the land—gentle or mountainous—is celebrated in *Leaves of Grass,* the sea unquestionably receives the chief emphasis and casts its spell over the whole book. Not forgetting Longfellow and Swinburne, one may perhaps assert that among Anglo-Saxon poets Whitman stands foremost and well-nigh alone as an ardent lover of the ocean.[1]

Even as a boy, he says in *Specimen Days,* he desired to write a poem about the sea-shore, "that suggesting, dividing line . . . blending the real and ideal." Later this desire seemed either hopeless or insufficient: he would take the sea not as a theme, but as "an invisible *influence,* a pervading gauge and tally." Then he goes on to tell of a memory that at intervals for years haunted him:

"a stretch of interminable white-brown sand, hard and smooth and broad, with the ocean perpetually, grandly, rolling in upon it, with slow-measured sweep, with rustle and hiss and foam, and many a thump as of low bass drums. This scene, this picture, I say, has risen before me at times for years. Sometimes I wake at night and can hear and see it plainly."

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[1] From the magical days of youth in the "beautiful town That is seated by the sea," Longfellow lived close to the ocean, ever mindful of its deep-breathed music, its brooding mystery, and its "old romantic legends." To his love of the sea he gave expression in such poems as "The Tides," "The Sound of the Sea," "The Building of the Ship," "Seaweed," "The Lighthouse," "The Phantom Ship."

This is the "influence" of *Leaves of Grass*. It appears and reappears in a score of forms. There are mid-ocean poems, such as "In Cabin'd Ships at Sea," pictures of steamers leaving the docks, harbor poems ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and many others), poems on the foamy wake of ships, glimpses of Yankee clippers speeding under sky-sails, of regattas on the bay, of fleets of ice-boats, poems on ships wrecked at sea or on the rocks, retellings of old-time naval fights, a memory of the Great Eastern swimming up the bay, poems on Columbus, on fishermen fishing with nets, on clam-diggers, on views from Montauk Point, on bathers at the shore, on wild storms muttering and roaring and shouting. In "A Song of Joys" he exclaims:

"O to go back to the place where I was born,
To hear the birds sing once more,
To ramble about the house and barn and over the fields once more,
And through the orchard and along the old lanes once more.
O to have been brought up on bays, lagoons, creeks, or along the coast,
To continue and be employ'd there all my life,
The briny and damp smell, the shores, the salt weeds exposed at low water,
The work of fishermen, the work of the eel-fisher and clam-fisher,

. . . .

In winter I take my eel-basket and eel-spear and travel out on foot on the ice . . .
Another time in warm weather out in a boat, to lift the lobster-pots where they are sunk with heavy stones (I know the buoys) . . .

Another time mackerel-taking . . .
Another time fishing for rock-fish . . ."

devoting almost ten times as much space to the sea surrounding Long Island as to the island itself. Virtually all of Whitman's truest poetry is concerned in some way with the sea: "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and such genuinely poetic passages as that beginning "I am he that walks with the tender and growing night." He describes the aspects and moods of the sea with rare vividness and sympathy. Men and women, so like himself, and the curious liquid identity so unlike himself, with its "mad pushes of waves upon the land"—these two enkindled his imagination more readily than any other influences. The long sailing-expeditions of his boyhood and early manhood, the amorous bathing by the smooth seashore, the eel-spearing and clam-digging and fishing, the midnight rambles along the water with its white gleams fitfully leaping, these all return again and again in *Leaves of Grass.* Reminiscence, which Whitman indulged far less than his literary progenitors such as Rousseau and Wordsworth, brought the sea and its shores and joys no matter where he went—that dream of the white-brown shore and the thumping, rustling waves never forsook him.

When Whitman, in his collection of poems on comradeship, desired to present ideal friendship in ideal surroundings, he had recourse to the sea:

" . . . the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health, refresh'd, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn,

When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear in the morning light,
When I wander'd alone over the beach, and undressing, bathed, laughing with the cool waters, and saw the sun rise,
And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way coming, O then I was happy,
O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food nourished me more, and the beautiful day pass'd well,
And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening came my friend,
And that night when all was still I heard the waters roll slowly continually up the shores,
I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering to congratulate me,
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was happy."

Again, when he wrote several poems on the death of President Lincoln, he included "O Captain! My Captain!" Here, as elsewhere in his writings, America (or Democracy) is a ship, with Lincoln as captain. The war is over, the nation is welded in blood, more closely than ever:

"Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead."

More conspicuous and significant, however, is Whitman's use of the sea as a symbol of life after death.

It appears as the theme of no fewer than ten poems, including the long "Passage to India," "Joy, Shipmate, Joy," "New Finalè to the Shore," "Sail out for Good, Eidólon Yacht!" Among the "Songs of Parting" he writes:

> "Joy, shipmate, joy!
> (Pleas'd to my soul at death I cry,)
> Our life is closed, our life begins,
> The long, long anchorage we leave,
> The ship is clear at last, she leaps!
> She swiftly courses from the shore,
> Joy, shipmate, joy."

The green waves, rolling in on Paumanok, the far horizon faint against the sky, never lost their strangeness. The miracles of the land seemed to Whitman no less wonderful but certainly more tangible, while the miracles of the sea remained forever inscrutable. Liquidness was curious enough, but liquidness and vastness in one, constantly inconstant in mood, formed a mystery akin to that of death and new life.

§ 3

From his earliest years—those years on the farm within sight and hearing of Long Island Sound and the Atlantic—Whitman enjoyed abounding health and an extraordinarily eager life of the senses, which were to be illustrated in every poem, nearly every line, that he subsequently wrote, and which made him regard with repulsion that tendency to the sickly that led Goethe to define romanticism as sickness (*Krankheit*). Writing by the side of a pond on a sunny day in February, Whitman exclaims:

> "I, too, like the rest, feel these modern tendencies (from all the prevailing intellections, literature and poems) to turn everything to pathos, ennui, morbidity, dissatisfaction, death. Yet how clear it is to me that these are not the born results, influences of Nature at all, but of one's own distorted, sick or silly soul. Here, amid this wild, free scene, how healthy, how joyous, how clean and vigorous and sweet!"

He, too, would be so—healthy, joyous, clean, vigorous, sweet—and apparently was so, from childhood onward. If he did not inherit the fine, though limited, culture that was born and bred into most of the New England writers, he received in place of it the gift of a perfect body: the product of two races, the English Whitmans, who had crossed over from Connecticut in the middle of the seventeenth century, and the Dutch Van Velsors, who were descendants of colonists of New Amsterdam. On both sides the stock was vigorous: Walter Whitman, the poet's father, was a strong man over six feet tall, and Louisa Van Velsor, his mother, was of a hardy peasant type, equable, self-contained, benevolent, one of those "powerful, uneducated persons" of *Leaves of Grass*. There was, also, it is true, a neurotic affection in the family—the youngest son was an imbecile, the oldest died a lunatic, and Walt himself had the divine madness. Yet his was the madness of a healthy giant, to whom illness and its effects on the mind and spirit (effects not always baneful) were quite unknown until middle age, when his poetic achievement was already virtually complete.

With the keenest of senses, the boy looked wonderingly upon the ever-shifting pageant of nature that surrounded him—the activities of the farm, the ardent life of birds, the procession of the flowers, the many-mooded ocean—all of it unspeakably beautiful and miraculous, as always to the eye and ear of childhood, most of all the childhood of our Wordsworths, Thoreaus, and Whitmans. A throbbing life of the senses, sometimes a dreamy loss of life itself through utter absorption in the spectacle! Or is it indeed the awakening of the soul, roused to consciousness by these wonders—how else explain the burning passion of the human dawn? Senses and soul, dare one sunder them, whom God hath joined together? To Walt, in whom the burning passion never died down, in whom the child was never lost,[1] the answer was not doubtful. From human beings, as from nature, came tremulously the same sensations; he was not alone amid these marvels of earth and sea and sky, but companioned by his kind, like yet unlike, identical with him yet also separate "identities." In the great city of New York, they teemed with the luxuriance of nature herself, all of them his brothers—on Broadway, on the ferries, in the theaters, drifting, mixing, thronging, dispersing, a few of them artificial and aloof, the rest simple and sound like the son of farmer-folk that he himself was. A strange world indeed, whose fascination grew into a passion as he rambled alone, or sought companionship, or read the classics of literature out of doors, shouting passages to the booming surf, or went to the theater, where he saw life concentrated, or to the opera house, where he discovered the ideal harmonies inherent in sound.

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[1] Cf. Rousseau: "Though born a man in certain respects, I remained long a child, and in many others I am still one." (*Confessions*)

It was valuable experience for a poet, this emotional commingling with multitudinous nature and humanity, though it would have been immeasurably more valuable if he had brought to it a more disciplined mind,[1] or if he had attained discipline through education. He had indeed small Latin and less Greek, and needed schooling vastly more than did Shakspere. Although it is true that he read the Bible, Shakspere, Homer, Greek tragedy, Dante, and other humanizing literature, he found in it chiefly wondrous pictures of the past and resonant lines suitable for declamation to the booming, rhythmical surf or to the eminently natural and unregenerate omnibus drivers of Manhattan; he liked nothing better than the Arabian Nights, the romances of Scott, and preferred to any books the journals and reviews (especially when illustrated) of his own time, and the daily newspapers, which aided him in his quest of "rapport" with America and modernity. He read, and clipped, and recorded voluminously, according to an unique and esoteric method, never in the spirit of the scholar—not even Emerson's American scholar—but in the spirit of the primitive poet, insatiable in his pursuit of emotional experience. All his life, wherever he went, he sought almost exclusively such knowledge as may be gained from "vistas and action"—the feverish stir of nature's life, the human flux of New York, the French market and the "bars" and the "crowded and bustling levees" of New Orleans, the countless marvels of the Universal Exposition in 1853, the excitement of the early war days—of crowds, banners, Yankee

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[1] "Like Blake he inverted the old Greek proverb, and by 'Nothing too much' meant not that nothing should but that nothing could be so," says Basil de Selincourt in praise of him. The praise is dubious.

Doodle, and marching columns—the solemn pulse of the nation's heart in Washington—the rumors and thrills, despondencies and ecstasies, the efflux of armies and the influx of shattered humanity. His greatest happiness was to be emotionally united with the show, his greatest misery to be long deprived of such sights and sensations.

The eye that gazed upon these wonders of man and nature, indeed the whole face of Walt Whitman, was remarkable (to use his own words in a sketch of himself) not because it was "intellectual," but because it was "calm and wholesome—a face of an unaffected animal." The ardent intelligence of Shakspere and other Elizabethans, who loved pageantry no less than he, was not in it. He had, rather, the vitality, the placidity, the contentment, the animal well being and repose, of his Dutch ancestors. "I doubt," he wrote, "if a heartier, stronger physique, more balanced upon itself, or more unconscious, more sound, ever lived" than he enjoyed until after the war; he was proud of his health, and on the whole lived with exceptional simplicity and abstemiousness, when one considers what expansive impulses he must have had. Though the facts are uncertain, it seems likely that the "amorous madness" on the whole treated him mercifully, thanks, perhaps, to that sentiment of chastity which Puritanism had diffused in America and which he was destined to outrage in his poems.[1] In the main he was certainly not gross, but in his animal way, feline or leonine way, fastidious.

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[1] Yet he became the father of at least six children, and, what is perhaps worse, described his irregularities in this atrocious sentence: "My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South, etc., have been jolly bodily, and doubtless open to criticism."

"The exquisite realization of health" was the mainspring of all of Whitman's passions. In his poems he rhapsodizes over his "perfect and enamor'd body"; he sings the body and its parts and purposes endlessly, omitting nothing; he celebrates the deliciousness of the sexes; he sets up for a pattern the "placid and self-contain'd" animals, because

"They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their
sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God."

He could not say too much in favor of animal health. The body and the soul are his two themes—his one theme, he would have said. "All comes by the body, only health puts you rapport with the universe." Without health nothing worth having is possible. Everything comes through the senses, those unsurpassed wonders and "instant conductors" of spirituality. Who would condemn the body, when "the spirit receives from the body just as much as it gives to the body, if not more?" It seemed to him he never could adequately prize his bodily senses.[1]

In most poets we can readily observe one sense which is of dominant importance; usually, of course, the sense of sight. But Whitman was abnormally developed: virtually every faculty was wide awake and responded immediately. In a large number of his catalogues he jumbles impressions received through eye, ear, and the sense of touch. In his threnody on the death of President Lincoln, a more carefully elaborated poem than he usually composed, he chooses three *motifs*—

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[1] Compare his English contemporary lover of nature, Richard Jefferies: "I believe in the flesh and the body, which is worthy of worship—to see a perfect human body unveiled causes a sense of worship. The ascetics are the only persons who are impure." (*The Story of My Heart,* p. 125.)

"Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my
soul"—

employing the three senses of smell, sight, and hearing, in the fragrance of the lilac, the drooping shine of the star, and the tender chant of the hermit thrush. Everywhere in his poems we find the words "sight," "sound," and so on, commonly preceding a rhapsody on the sense mentioned. Sometimes the device is entirely deliberate, as in "Salut au Monde," in which he invites us to take his hand while we see "Such gliding wonders! such sights and sounds!" After a score of lines, the poet prods us into asking "What do you hear Walt Whitman?" which gives Walt permission to unload nineteen "I hear's." Then, by no means weary, we inquire, "What do you see Walt Whitman?" Alas, he is more than ready with his "I see's" (including, if I recall aright, only two "beholds" and one "I look") to the amazing number of ninety-seven! Whereupon he concludes by firing an endless salute of "You's," and returns from "all the haunts and homes of men" supremely satisfied.

Of Whitman's senses only one was normal—the sense of taste. In the hundreds of pages of his collected poems, one cannot, unless I have read hastily, find a single significant reference to the sense of taste. There is, to be sure, a juicy and flavorous blackberry, and casual reference to the taste of fresh air; but the latter is not so much a matter of taste as of pleasure in filling the lungs, and the former, a poor solitary berry, does not greatly affect the assertion that the sense of taste plays no part in Whitman's poetry. In his diary there is again only one instance —"the wild and free and somewhat acrid" flavor of cedar fruit. Whitman had not the romantic desire to taste miscellaneous fruits and roots and berries, and took only normal pleasure in the foods and drinks of civilization.

To divine the importance of the sense of touch is not so easy. Often what seems a matter of touch proves on closer inspection to concern all the senses. Whitman was magnetically drawn to human beings, for instance—liked to join hands with friends when he talked, enjoyed feverishly at times the feeling of proximity, celebrated not only the love of the sexes but "the dear love of comrades" in terms of bodily contact—but how largely the sense of touch was concerned is by no means clear. "The float and odor of hair," involving two other senses, is a phrase that suggests the part played in this connection by senses other than touch. The song of the thrush may be enjoyed by only one sense, but the touch of human beings, "the souse upon me of my lover the sea, as I lie willing and naked," the whir and pressure of the wind as one races "naked along the shore," certainly involve other senses. In any event, however, it is obvious that Whitman responded powerfully to the touch of flesh on flesh, the heat of the sun that comes "streaming kissingly," the gentle caress of the wind, "laving one's face and hands," and the amorous weight and curious liquidness of sea waves. "To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand," he says in his "Song of Myself";

"Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new
identity. . . .
My flesh and blood playing out lightnings to strike
what is hardly different from myself,"

until the fellow-senses seem to slip away, "bribed to swap off with touch," and he is at the mercy of one sense:

"You villain touch! what are you doing? my breath is
tight in its throat,
Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me."

Even when, as an old invalid, he was presented with a horse and buggy, he changed his gift horse for a livelier animal, and drove into the wind gloriously at the rate of eighteen miles an hour!

The sense of sight, the most abundantly used of the five, was of considerable moment to Whitman; "bereft of light," he would have suffered as keenly as most poets. Color always delighted him, particularly the colors of the sky both day and night. He does not celebrate wet, cloudy, colorless days, but gorgeous sunrises and sunsets and the delicate colors of clear or filmy days. When he lived at Timber Creek after paralysis attacked him, he paid special attention to "sky views and effects," which he watched from "peculiar spots" according to the views and effects that the hour promised. Late of a May afternoon he could see strange shows "in light and shade—enough to make a colorist go delirious," which implies a suspicious sympathy with the colorist. He had an eye for pictorial effect: "As I slowly hobble up the lane toward day-close, an incomparable sunset shooting in molten sapphire and gold, shaft after shaft, through the ranks of the long-leaved corn, between me and the west." On another day his only entry was an attempt to describe the various greens of trees: "The rich dark green of the tulip-trees and the oaks, the gray of the swamp-willows, the dull hues of the sycamores and black-walnuts, the emerald of the cedars (after rain), and the light yellow of the beeches." Liver-color and amber were two colors that he recorded frequently. At the shore he watched "amber-rolling waves, changing as the tide comes in to a transparent tea-color." In a St. Louis plate glass factory he saw molten stuff, "of a glowing pale yellow color," in a pot, and declared "that Pot, shape, color, concomitants, more beautiful than any antique statue," and he saw a glorious "pale redtinged yellow," and later an aurora borealis blue-green at a zinc smelter that gave him "new revelations in the color line."

The hours of darkness also showed him many hues and tints. Frequently his nights are blue-black and full-starr'd. He was extremely interested in the stars—though he named them so late in life that he produced no adequate catalogue in his poetry. Jupiter is a "huge haphazard splash"; he sees the branches of the Milky Way; the moon, a lady whom he loved as delicately as an Elizabethan, is dressed in shimmering "pellucid green and tawny vapor," or "a transparent blue-gray," or "an aureole of tawny transparent brown" and "clear vapory light-green." He delighted in making trips on the Delaware—or on the Mississippi—in the moonlight. Without the night and the stars, he says somewhere, there could not well be any spirituality.

The sense of hearing offered another inlet of spirituality. In *Leaves of Grass* it is as prominent as the sense of sight—"I hear" usually follows "I see"; and in *Specimen Days* he begins a typical entry with a picture, and then, after a mechanical "For Sounds" as a sort of For Sale sign, evaluates the delights which the place affords the ear. The bumble-bee bears down on him with "a loud swelling perpetual hum, varied now and then by something almost like a shriek"; which seems a good background, he says, applying a term of painting to music, for some bumble-bee symphony. He catches well the quality of the tree-toads' chirrup and trill—they are "fretting" and they "purr." Several times he endeavors to describe adequately the song of the cicada and succeeds tolerably. In the winter the ice over the creek sighs and snorts. When the birds are migrating he hears overhead by night "a velvety rustle, long drawn out." He enjoyed the songs of birds so much that he attended their matins and vespers, and especially in the evening was "quite strictly punctual." Less conventional was his delight at hearing "the sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind." From his earliest years he declaimed Homer and Shakspere to the waves, and even when at Timber Creek, recovering from a stroke of paralysis, he concluded his wrestles with a sapling by bellowing "the stock poets or plays" and negro and army songs while the echoes reimbursed him fully, and an owl on the other side of the creek "sounded *too-oo-oo-oo-oo*, soft and pensive (and I fancied a little sarcastic)." In "A Song of Joys" he sang those of the orator—not a saintly orator like Emerson, but one who could "roll the thunder of the voice out from the ribs and throat" and thus "lead America." He was passionately fond of music—heard operas with great enjoyment in his New York years, liking especially those of Verdi and Donizetti; in "Proud Music of the Storm" he refers to "Italia's peerless compositions." Later a Beethoven septette affected him profoundly, more than anything he had heard previously. But cheap, everyday songs affected him no less: he lingered, of a February night along the Delaware, listening to "the echoing calls of the railroad men in the West Jersey depot yard," calls with such "musical, emotional effects, never thought of before," that he could not leave the scene.

Even a cursory inspection of *Leaves of Grass* or of *Specimen Days* will suffice to show the extraordinary emphasis in Whitman on the sense of smell. He could detect fragrance in well-nigh everything. Not only summer but early summer has a perfume all its own. There is an "exquisite smell of the earth at daybreak, and all through the forenoon"; the evening has its sweet and slightly aromatic air; and "the natural perfume belonging to the night alone" winds up the series, with only the afternoon omitted. The odors of apples, of the cedar, and of Indian corn pervade many of Whitman's pages. Corn when gathered has an aroma "rich, rare, ripe, peculiar," and at night is "just-palpable." He was fond of just-palpable odors, the most spiritual doubtless, but he also professed a love for the strong perfume of lilac flowers. He pulled everlasting and stuffed it in his trousers-pocket "for scent." The complex impressions of night came to him, he says, chiefly through the sense of smell. He discerned countless odors: those of grass, moist air, milk, willows, matted leaves, swamps, green leaves and dry leaves, hair, birch-bark, sea-rocks, shore mud. "There is a scent to everything," he wrote in his diary, "even the snow, if you can detect it—no two places, hardly any two hours, anywhere exactly alike. How different the odor of noon from midnight, or winter from summer, or a windy spell from a still one." Keenness of scent can hardly go farther, in man at least.

Obviously Whitman had a body admirably adequate to his demands on it. He gloried in his health, I have said, since from his point of view the spirit receives from the body as much as, if not more than it gives. One word that recurs constantly in Whitman's prose and verse is "absorbing." It may be found in his earliest poems, in which as the caresser of life, he is absorbing all, "not a person or object missing"; and it may be found in the fragments written in his last years, when he looks back on his life of "wandering, peering, dallying with all—war, peace, day and night absorbing." Sometimes he drinks or takes in, or is filled, or deposits, or feasts, or gets nutriment, or is suffused, or finds sustenance, but most of these occur only once: absorbing was his favorite word for the idea of exaltation through the bounties brought by the senses. He absorbed anything as bulky as Canada, or as impalpable as the dusky green of the cedar. Everything was to him so much spiritual food—but food is rather a poor word, implying as it does only one channel of delight. With his whole body, with every sense, he absorbed the land, the people on it, the sea, and the interminable starry heights above. The absorption was so immediate that he even spoke of the "soul senses."

This desire to have all parts of the universe filter into his body was due to Whitman's mystical conception of the unity between man and nature, together constituting God. The universe is a "nebulous float," indestructible, eternal, and divine even unto the trees in the ground and the weeds of the sea. He himself is "effusing and fluid" in this divine solution—"a phantom curiously floating." Sometimes he asserts that objects are merely the symbols of the unseen; such is his tenor when most deliberate. But elsewhere he proclaims, as in his "Song for Occupations," that "Objects gross and the unseen soul are one," and certainly in practice he embraces every object passionately, as if it were of final and infinite excellence. Objects have what he has, a body and soul strangely blended; and the separateness, or "identity," of each object is only an appearance, for any identity may be "of one phase and of all phases." All individuals and all objects are thus at once microcosm and macrocosm. The unifying force in the universe is love, a passionate sympathy, by which all objects are, as it were, dissolved in the "eternal float of solution." This love is the sympathy which one feels in moving the hand over one's naked body; it is the flooding emotion which comes to one in a gathering of fellow men and women; it is the refreshing solemnity or the primitive joy one has in contemplating the clouds roving silent in the blue sky. This force, which radiates and transfuses the whole cosmos, makes life, all life, any manner of life, an endless blessing. It obliterates values, causes the here and now—no matter how mean or pitiful if judged conventionally—to be utterly glorious. "All goes onward and outward"; there is no pause in the everlasting, accumulating procession of the world's excellences.

§ 4

Belated voice of the romantic spirit of the early nineteenth century, Whitman spoke with impressive force and sanity to a generation and a country beginning to question the life and literature of that "hysterical sick-chamber," Europe, and oppressed with the conventionalism and materialism of unheroic ante-bellum America. To the pusillanimity and valetudinarianism of that epoch, *Leaves of Grass* came like a tonic, oceanic gale, sweeping away all meanness of body and soul and inviting a large, free life in accordance with the dictates of the inner self. For many years, it is true, Whitman's barbaric yawp and immoderate celebration of the body electric alienated the mass of readers and prevented his attaining that commanding position which his disciples and the new time spirit have now won for him. Yet from the beginning men of discernment recognized that, for better or worse, a great poetic power had come into the world, bringing a fresh vision of nature and of man, a vision strikingly like that of the New England Transcendentalists and at the same time quite as strikingly unlike. It was not chance that the first important admirers of the book were the men of Concord—Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott. Emerson's famous letter to Mr. Walter Whitman, written a fortnight after the publication of the edition of 1855, is equally a tribute to Whitman's power and to Emerson's largeness:

> "I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things, said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large

perception only can inspire. I greet you at the beginning of a great career. . . . It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging."

Emerson was right; the book has all of these qualities, and the poet has entered upon a great career. Not with the serene detachment of Emerson, heir of a priestly tradition, but with a rude and passionate vigor drawn from the soil of Long Island and a succession of farming ancestors, *Leaves of Grass* repeats the Transcendental love of nature, faith in individualism, and prophecy of democracy.[1] Small wonder that Emerson, and even Thoreau, recognized the kinship, despite the harshness of the yawp, while Whittier threw his copy into the flames, and Lowell—the later Lowell, renegade Transcendentalist—held aloof. Yet the differences between Whitman and the Concord group go far deeper than matters of accent and method; they penetrate to fundamentals. Obviously Whitman and Thoreau are worlds apart; and so, less obviously, are Whitman and Emerson. Nature, individualism, and democracy—yes; but Whitman's conception of them is nowise Emerson's. To take, at this point, but a single instance, a fundamental difference between the two men is involved in Emerson's love of distinctions, of gradations and contrasts of the Platonic sort, and Whitman's "indiscriminate hurrahing for the Universe."[2] Though looking toward unity as steadily as

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[1] Though there is some uncertainty as to the degree of Whitman's familiarity with Emerson's ideas and books before the writing of *Leaves of Grass,* there is clearly truth, if exaggerated truth, in Whitman's remark, reported by Trowbridge, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to boil."

[2] William James, in an essay on Emerson in *Memories and Studies.* Emerson describes himself and certainly not Whitman

Whitman, Emerson was ever averse from what is perhaps the dominant intellectual habit and weakness of Whitman, his blurring of things unlike and his impressionistic ecstasy in contemplating the blur. Though both were mystical, the one built a secure substructure for his tower of vision, from which he looked with awe or ineffable peace into pure spirit, while the other, abjuring all props and safeguards, fell into delusions and infatuations that rendered it impossible for his readers to discern how much of his vision is spiritual insight and how much is only indulgence of the temperament. Emerson is "the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit" because he helps us out of that inner confusion which is perhaps the chief malady of human existence; Whitman not only accepts this inner confusion but sets it up as an object of worship.

Perhaps it is not too much to say that the unpardonable sin of our era is precisely this delusive insistence on the indissoluble unity of the human constitution, this denial, not of the Holy Ghost, but of the distinction between an impersonal pure reason or spirit in man and the personal life of the temperament, this denial of the dualism of man's nature of which the evidence is the experience of every man who confronts his consciousness in all candor and the testimony of the sages from Socrates, Plato, Sophocles, Aristotle, Jesus, and Buddha, through St. Francis, Dante, and Milton down to Emerson himself. It is everywhere present in the writings of Emerson, though it was certainly not this that made Whitman address the oracle of Concord as his "dear

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when he writes, in his first book, "The wise man shows his wisdom in separation, in gradation, and his scale of creatures and of merits is as wide as nature."

friend and master." For example this passage, in which the metaphor is unfortunate but the meaning unmistakable:

> "One key, one solution to the mysteries of human condition, one solution to the old knots of fate, freedom, and foreknowledge, exists, the propounding, namely, of the double consciousness. A man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and his public nature, as the equestrians in the circus throw themselves nimbly from horse to horse, or plant one foot on the back of one, and the other foot on the back of the other."

On the one hand, in the "dual world," is nature, partly outside of man—"forest, sea, and shore"—partly within man—"the drag of temperament and race." And on the other hand is thought, or spirit, or the moral sentiment—infinite, of unlimited power, the humanism of man. "Here they are, side by side, god and devil, mind and matter, king and conspirator, belt and spasm, riding peacefully together in the eye and brain of every man." In all that Emerson wrote of the correspondence of nature and spirit, answering to each other part for part like print and seal, he never for a moment proposed that we should regard them as the same thing, an indissoluble unity—here they are, side by side, and wisdom consists in relating oneself to each according to its authority. The higher authority in the life of man belongs to that which constitutes him man and not nature—the universal spirit or soul, "within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other," the supreme critic of the individual life and the coherent force of any society moving not toward chaos but toward solidarity.

In Whitman there is nothing of all this. That "fluid and swallowing soul," as he describes himself, filled to overflowing with the joy of living, finding everything in the universe essential and therefore equally good, beholding nothing sinister in the world save shams and conventions and "refinement," feeling within him a "cosmic elemental passion" that taught only "the profound lesson of reception, nor preference nor denial," patterning himself after "the great silent savage all-acceptive Mother" (Nature), was so supremely content with the beauty, the wonder, and the mystery of the All, with the sufficiency of being alive, that he completely ignored all those distinctions between personal and impersonal, temperament and spirit, nature and man, upon which all the wisdom of the ages rests. He may have been right and all the past wrong, from the ancient East and Greece to his prototype Rousseau; in these matters there can only be, as Amiel says, certitude without proof. Yet it must be confessed that the inner life of man since the time of Rousseau has been unprecedentedly confused and rarely capable of happiness, and that the outer life of humanity, despite its manifestations of a noble idealism of freedom and democracy, has recorded a history that makes Rousseau's pessimism as to the value of civilization almost plausible. The assumption of dualism is far from discredited. Is it not instinctive in nearly all men?

In Whitman himself there is, if not dualism in its historic sense, a dualism of another kind—the romantic dualism of conformity and individualism, externality and inwardness:

"Whoever you are, come forth! or man or woman come
forth! . . .

Another self, a duplicate of every one, skulking and hiding
it goes,

. . . .

Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright, death
under the breast-bones, hell under the skull-bones,
Under the broadcloth and gloves, under the ribbon and
artificial flowers,
Keeping fair with the customs, speaking not a syllable of
itself,
Speaking of anything else but never of itself."

This dualism of the two selves is set forth clearly in the poem entitled "To You." The you of conformity and externality is here regarded as walking in a dream, in "commerce, shops, work, farms, clothes, the house, buying, selling, eating, drinking, suffering, dying,"—a world of mockeries—and the you of individualism and inwardness, the real You, is exhorted to assert its inalienable supremacy:

"You have not known what you are, you have slumber'd
upon yourself all your life . . .
Whoever you are! claim your own at any hazard!"

So far as it goes, this dualism of the romanticists, from Rousseau to James Oppenheim and all the other disciples of Whitman, is sound and salutary. Its negation of the worth of the blindly conforming self, the puny and mean-spirited, the philistine self, is a valuable contribution towards a larger life, and so is its promulgation of the majesty of a more real self that lies dormant in most men. But it does not go far enough, it does not reveal the innermost self that slumbers. Its magnificently ringing summons evokes, not that self which is not self at all, the impersonal or universal self of Greek humanism and of Christianity, but the individual or unique self, "the precious idiocrasy and special nativity and intention that he is, the man's self," as Whitman puts it. If it may be said that this self includes a portion of the universal self, the fact remains that it fuses this portion of the universal with the natural or temperamental self, with "the drag of temperament," and that, in practice, the natural man will be ever inclined to dominate, asserting himself either avowedly, glorying in his freedom, or secretly, giving to his desires the fine trappings of things spiritual. If dualism there must be, if a choice between one kind of life and another, the inferiority of the romantic dualism would seem to be demonstrated by definition, as it is certainly demonstrated by practice.

In Whitman, at all events, the natural man was dominant, both in his relation to nature and in his relation to mankind. He did not bring to "forest, sea, and shore," with Emerson and Wordsworth, a rich tradition of humane culture, a heritage of character and wisdom received through ancestry and education;[1] he came with little more than a fine body, keen senses, a wholesome animal constitution, and the emotional force of genius. He had not committed Thoreau's error of avoidance of the madding throng, but in his free mingling with humanity he forgot that there is a sense in which "we descend to meet"—his relation to others was in the main gregarious, undiscriminating, a love of the natural man for natural men; the divinity of the divine average, which Christ perceived perfectly, was seen darkly by him, to whom "average" meant more than

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[1] Wordsworth himself recognized his debt to the past: "I . . . carried about me," he says in "The Prelude," "the experience of past ages."

"divine." Human life as pageantry, nature as pageantry, enthralled his perennially boyish gaze.

Wonder—reverie—love: these three terms sum up the essentials of Whitman's relation to nature. Once more the wonder of romanticism, pleased, ineffably pleased, at the curious actuality of things, one thing as strange as another. He wrote a poem of pure wonder, entitled "Miracles":

"Why, who makes much of a miracle?
As to me I know of nothing else but miracles,
Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,
. . . .
Or watch honey-bees busy around the hive of a summer
    forenoon,
Or animals feeding in the fields,
Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,
Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining
    so quiet and bright,
Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon in
    spring;
These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,
The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place.

"To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread
    with the same,
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same."

Then come the miracles of the sea, and he stops, rather earlier than in most of his catalogues; poems must end, if miracles do not. What shall we say of these lists of wonders? Surely the sense of wonder is poetic—things are indeed wonderful—if not profoundly poetic.

The sense of wonder is the dawn of poetry, as it is the dawn of life—the beginning of something above mere animal perception, the child's, the savage's spirituality. To stop there is to remain a child or savage. Whitman passed on to reverie.

Wonder is momentary, however often repeated; reverie is continuous. It may bring images not present in the visible scene, like those day-dreams of Jean Jacques in the forest, radiant visions of Arcadian perfection and happiness, or it may find its substance in the visible scene itself, as in the case of Whitman. He did not dream of the remote or unreal, but of the here and now, the commonplace, in which he would lose himself to find himself:

"To emerge and be of the sky, of the sun and moon and
flying clouds, as one with them."

In the teeming life of nature, as among the crowds on the ferries and the streets, he passed beyond the sense of wonder, which implies a certain aloofness from things—wonder *at* things—to the immediacy of reverie, making himself an integral part of the universe of things, drifting in the current of nature's life, loafing and inviting his soul.

Inviting his soul! Surely, he felt, spiritual wisdom may be won from immersion in the life, the spirit, of nature. Wonder, reverie, then revelation. Addressing his soul, he writes of an experience in which his inner life culminated:

"I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer
morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently
turn'd over upon me,

And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged
your tongue to my bare-stript heart,
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you felt
my feet.
Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,

And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my
own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my
own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and
the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm-fence, heap'd stones, elder,
mullein and poke-weed."

The all-acceptive Mother had at last accepted him; he was no longer a mere identity, but part and parcel of the whole, a drop in the surging sea of life. And the message received was a message of love—"a kelson of the creation is love"—confirming what had long been perhaps the deepest impulse of his nature. He was destined to be one of the most puissant teachers of sympathy in the most passionately humanitarian century in all history.[1]

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[1] The connection between emotional absorption in nature and humanitarianism has become a convention of the modern mind. Compare, for instance, the revelation that overwhelms the egoism of the hero in the third volume of *Jean-Christophe:* "A new soul had been born. . . . Now that he was caught up again by the creative force which flows through the world, he was amazed to the point of ecstasy at the world's wealth. He loved, he *was*, his neighbor as himself. And all things were 'neighbors' to him, from the grass beneath his feet to the man whose hands he

§ 5

As Thoreau yearned for the wild, Whitman yearned for human love, which affected him, he says, like the primal sanities of sun and wind. In *Leaves of Grass* he announced: "I am he that aches with love." "He fed upon people," says Professor Triggs, "as bees upon flowers"; they must be, like flowers, natural, simple, not exceptional—the plain people, boatmen, stage-drivers, day laborers, not the intellectual classes, whom he would doubtless have styled "highbrows" if he had written his poems fifty years later. Men of letters, learned men, professional men he regarded with a lurking suspicion even when they had accepted his gospel; his affection was by no means all-inclusive. Best of all he loved uneducated persons whom he could hold by the hand or kiss on the cheek with his bearded lips, like "dear little Peter"—Peter Doyle, the street-car conductor, a good soul who listened gravely to Walt's expositions of his literary aims, understanding them as little as Thérèse understood the harangues of Rousseau. Of Whitman's magnetic power, which drew to him unreservedly persons of various classes, there is

clasped. A fine tree, the shadow of a cloud on the mountain, the breath of the fields borne upward on the wind, and, at night, the hive of heaven buzzing with the swarming suns . . . his blood raced through him . . . he had no desire to speak or to think, he desired only to laugh and to cry, and to melt away into the living marvel of it all" (pp. 338–39). This is from a typical, perhaps *the* typical novel of the early twentieth century. A humbler example I have culled from an American newspaper of the Far West: "Here you become one with the expanding sky, the reflecting water, the calm growing trees, the playful grasses. Something liberal takes possession of your heart and brain and soul and a great kindliness glows within you. Humanity is softly transmuted into an essence of brotherhood."

no question. His friend Burroughs attributed to him a "new and mysterious bodily quality," which differentiates it admirably from the spiritual attraction of a man like Emerson, whose "magnetism" Whitman felt and acknowledged as soon as they met. Nor can there be any question regarding his power over the wounded soldiers in the Washington hospitals, a tonic power that caused the doctors to say sometimes: "Turn him over to Whitman. Perhaps he will save him."

Was not this the consecration of Whitman's brotherly love—this absolutely unselfish devotion to the wounded in the war that welded the Union, his America? It is true that he might have served in the field, like his brother George, an unimaginative man of action, who was among the first to enlist, though the discipline of the army ill suited Walt's indolent, dreamy individualism. Perhaps he did as well—though scarcely better, as Dr. Bucke insists—in ministering to some eighty or one hundred thousand men, according to his own estimate, giving them, along with tobacco, apples, sticks of candy, and the like, the stimulation of his tonic magnetism and affection. If he did not undertake the task deliberately but waited till his brother was wounded in 1862, when he went to the front in Virginia and was fascinated by the sight of terrible suffering, the fact remains that he gave himself completely to the work he saw to do, spending his scant wealth, and drawing upon his vast physical and moral reserves till he collapsed. If it is true that his reaction to the war was not remarkably intelligent, one must still deplore the mood of George Santayana's remark, however true it may be at bottom, that "he could only gaze at the picturesque and terrible aspects of the struggle, and linger among the wounded day after day with a canine devotion." It was more than canine, though less than spiritual.

If quantity were all, the humanitarianism of Whitman would merit all that has been said of it by his followers, to many of whom he is the Christ of the modern world. There are, however, not only degrees but kinds of humanitarianism, and Whitman's kind is not the highest. The highest is spiritual—love based on a vivid perception of a peculiarly human, or divine, principle in all men, the "reason" of Plato and Aristotle, the "spirit" of Jesus and St. Paul, the impersonal self that we have already discussed, sharply contrasted with the natural or temperamental self. Fearing the delusions to which the natural self subjects man, spiritual humanitarianism is ill content with the generous doctrine that

> "He prayeth best, who loveth best [= most]
> All things both great and small,"

preferring the more disciplinary doctrine of Aristotle:

> "It is a man's duty to flee from wickedness with all his might and to strive to be good, because thus he may be friends with himself and may come to be a friend to another,"

or of St. John:

> "By this we know that we love the children of God, ?
> when we love God, and keep his commandments."

A second and inferior type of humanitarianism is economic, practical—affection for men based, not on self-control and the love of God, but on a sense of humanity's material needs and rights, the affection of philanthropists like Benjamin Franklin and nearly all socialists. Although it is a mighty force in modern life, directed and organized by wonder-working natural science and the democratic polity, economic humanitarianism is essentially unstable, ignoring as it does the basis of true "social justice":

> "He that feeds men serveth few;
> He serves all who dares be true."

Between the two types is a third that might be termed emotional or instinctive—sympathy of the gregarious sort, the sentiment of the herd, the love of kin and kind.[1] The three types need not, of course, exclude each other. Since man has a dual nature, he may love not only spiritually but gregariously, as Shakspere perhaps did, and spiritual love results in material welfare ("these things shall be added unto you"). Economic and emotional humanitarianism, again, may have an admixture of spirituality, more or less fitful. In an era like ours, inclined to refuse all distinctions because distinctions are never fully realized, it is difficult to remember the practical value of division and definition; it is easy to bear in mind that in any given case modification must be allowed for. In the case of Whitman certainly, it would be hazardous to assert that spiritual insight was totally wanting, that his sympathy was merely gregarious sympathy in a human form. But every allowance made, we must not obscure the plain fact that his brotherly love is not a development of the classical conception of the ethical unity of man or the Christian conception of the spiritual unity of man. Nothing of the glad renunciation of religion—shall we say "virtually nothing"?—manifests itself in Whitman's life or writings. His portrait, in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass,* is not that of the carpenter Jesus but of the carpenter Walt, in all his reposeful indolence and natural self-sufficiency, strong of will yet undisciplined. Apparently the only time in his career when the ethical life and its relation to the life of the spirit attracted his attention was in his youth, when he wrote with doubtful sincerity of such popular "causes" as temperance and the abolition of slavery and of capital punishment, expatiating on "the fiery fountain which bubbles up from hell" while he drank from that very fountain in a New York saloon. His sexual life need not particularly concern us; more significant than any of his infringements on the code is his reason for avoiding marriage—"an overmastering passion for freedom, unconstraint." Not renunciation, but unconstraint, freedom from all bonds, all limits, a childlike indulgence of his natural self—happily, he had also the wholesomeness of the child. He enjoyed expansiveness in his own life, and wished a similar good fortune for his country, destined soon, he thought, to absorb Canada and Cuba, to become the leading power of the Atlantic, and to master altogether the Pacific ("that sea and its countless paradises of islands"). Forgetting Greece, he associated spiritual grandeur with physical, finding in the geography of the United States an indication of spiritual mission. Turn where one will in his biography or his poems, one will look in vain for indications of any discipline, intellectual or ethical, making for self-mastery and spiritual vision.

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[1] The three types correspond with the three types of friendship described by Aristotle: that of the good, that of utility, that of pleasure.

The twist that Whitman gave to the Christian law—"love thy neighbor," which became his humanitarianism, "as thyself," which became his individualism—is patent in his gospel for the modern world as expounded in *Leaves of Grass* and *Democratic Vistas.* Setting aside the "amative love" of the poets, and disregarding altogether the spiritual love of Platonism and Christianity, he calls for a new "adhesive love,"

> "The institution of the dear love of comrades,"

destined to offset the vulgarity and materialism of democratic America. "I confidently expect a time when there will be seen, running like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible and visible worldly interests of America, threads of manly friendship, fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and lifelong, carried to degrees hitherto unknown," such friendship as that of Whitman and Peter Doyle; "many will say it is a dream," he remarks prophetically. Yet this fraternity is not his real goal; repeatedly he states that we are to conceive adhesive love, not as an end in itself, but as a means, without which the ultimate object would be impossible. This ultimate object is "individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself—identity—personalism." In the end, man "must become a law . . . unto himself." Gone is the external authority of religion, gone the feudal ideal of man: democracy awaits a new vision of the human law.

Whitman proceeds to offer such a vision in the form of an imaginatively conceived "model" upon which the individual should seek to pattern himself. "The main thing" must be that "precious idiocrasy and special nativity" which has been already mentioned—nothing must be allowed to imperil the individual's uniqueness. It is imperiled, for example, by its rival, culture, which also aims at a pattern, but which shapes a man in such wise that "the simply good and healthy and brave parts of him are reduced and clipped away, like the bordering of box in the garden," in oblivion of his kinship with "the mountain peaks, the ocean, and the tumbling gorgeousness of the clouds." In his disdain for the pseudo-culture that makes men both less than human and less than natural, Whitman thus condemns also genuine culture, which would make men human and more than natural. He demands, instead, a new culture directed to "the formation of a typical personality of character, eligible to the uses of the high average of men—and not restricted by conditions ineligible to the masses," a culture suited to the limitations of "practical life, the west, the workingmen," etc. He goes on to picture the new ideal:

> "a well-begotten selfhood—in youth, fresh, ardent, emotional, aspiring, full of adventure; at maturity, brave, perceptive, under control, neither too talkative nor too reticent, neither flippant nor somber; of the bodily figure, the movements easy, the complexion showing the best blood, somewhat flushed, breast expanded, an erect attitude, a voice whose sound outvies music, eyes of calm and steady gaze, yet capable also of flashing—and a general presence that holds its own in the company of the highest."

Energy under control—what more would you have? But under control of what—the rational principle of the Greeks, the indwelling spirit of Christianity, or the instincts of a healthy animal capable of holding its own?

It is not easy to reconcile this picture with that vision of Arcadian brotherhood at which we glanced a moment ago. Whitman himself was troubled by the gap between his adhesive love and his personalism and sought to fill it.

Hence his gospel of "religiousness." This gospel is necessarily vague, partly because of human limitations, partly because of Whitman's limitations. Aside from his joy in living, his ecstatic sense of wonder, his absorption in reverie, his transfusion of himself with the flux of nature, he cannot well be said to have had religious experience. Certainly, of religious experience as the world has known it he was, as he said himself, completely ignorant. It is true that he urged the need of "a strong mastership of the general inferior self by the superior self," but, as we have seen, these selves are those of a romantic and not of a religious dualism. Again, when he defines independence as "freedom from all laws or bonds except those of one's own being, controlled by the universal ones," his verbal repetition of the wisdom of the ages is characteristically followed by this sentence: "To lands, to man, to woman, what is there at last to each, but the inherent soul, nativity idiocrasy, free, highest-poised, soaring its own flight, following out itself?" His whole discussion of religion, indeed, is a mass of ill sorted ideas, from which the reader emerges without a single definite conception of any aspect of Whitman's religiousness. In *Democratic Vistas,* still more in *Leaves of Grass,* he leaves us at last with his gospel of individualism and his gospel of solidarity in violent conflict. Others have preached both gospels abundantly; to the great need of his own century and of ours, a firm grasp on the best means of reconciling them, Whitman made no contribution. Despite his elaborate propaganda, therefore, he is far less valuable to us to-day than Emerson, who reinterpreted dualism in terms of modern thought, or Lincoln, foremost of democrats, whose "goodness and tenderness," mentioned by Whitman, who loved him passionately, had other and higher grounds than Whitman's devotion to humanity.

Yet when this has been said, along with everything else in the foregoing study of the specious elevation of Whitman's message, it will not do to forget Lincoln's remark as he watched Whitman walking down Pennsylvania Avenue one day, "Well, he looks like a *man*," or Emerson's magnanimous letter to the poet "at the beginning of a great career" and his words to Moncure Conway, on lending him a copy of *Leaves of Grass*, "No man with eyes in his head but could recognize a real poet in that book." A man, if only a natural man—a poet, if not a wise poet. More than any of his contemporary poets he had the energy, the dynamic force, characteristic of the literature of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. He had it, also, with a freedom from the morbidity of the period that is almost unexampled (unless one is disposed to emphasize the truth in his own observation that the very joy of our time is morbid), breathing into our literature the sanity of nature like no one else since Wordsworth. His poems have the medicinal wholesomeness of the meadows and woods and ocean, a quality transferable, and accountable for much of his vogue. Stricken with paralysis, basking naked in the sun by Timber Creek, the aging poet writes in his notebook that he has never before got so close to nature, that she never before came so close to him; "somehow I seemed to get identity with each and everything around me. . . . Deliciousness, sane, calm, Nakedness in Nature!" Immersed in her health, he absorbed her virtue. In less degree he had done so all his life, and had maintained through her tonic properties that fine animalism and temperamental exuberance that were his richest inheritance. In the hour of weariness and perplexity, we can find in the pages of his book, *Leaves of Grass,* a large measure of that "fortifying and encouraging" power (to use Emerson's letter once more) which resides in nature herself.

CHAPTER VII

LANIER

§ I

"Corn," "The Song of the Chattahoochee," "The Marshes of Glynn," and "Sunrise" are Lanier's best poems, and at the same time are poems of nature; as poet, even as musician, he found his subjects in nature. And as a poet of nature, he happily does what none of his predecessors had done—Poe least of all—he presents with some adequacy the Southern scene. Althought not all of the South is to be found in his work, he gives us perhaps as much as any poet can present sympathetically. He had traveled, says his biographer, from San Antonio to Jacksonville, and from Baltimore to Mobile Bay; and wherever he went his eye and heart seized the mood of the landscape as only a true poet's eye and heart can. River and seashore, fields of corn and of cotton, marshes and foothills and mountains—he loved them all. His projected "Hymns of the Mountains," like most of the work that he planned, never came to be, but at least two remarkable "Hymns of the Marshes" are in his single volume of poems, and they are enough to constitute him the poet of the marshes. In his letters as in his poems we glimpse again and again the "romantic" Southern scene, full of light and cheer, with its snowy cotton fields and shining corn, its red soil glowing beneath the green pines and blue sky, its farmhouses under the airy sycamores, its redbirds and wrens and mocking-birds, its singing negroes, its mules, its very corn-pone and snap-beans.

Most of all he loved the scene of his boyhood and youth at Macon, and other parts of Georgia that he came to know later—especially, of course, the marshes by the sea. It is true that he understood Florida well enough to make it real for us, in the prose of his Florida handbook and in several poems. In "A Florida Ghost," "A Florida Sunday," and "From the Flats" we see the soft white sands of the far Southern coast—

"The grace of God made manifest in curves"

—the distant palms, more and more distant, filming to nothingness, the keys

"That laced the land like fragile patterns wrought
To edge old broideries,"

the gray pelican poised above the shallows, the white slender lighthouse on the point, the live oaks with their pea-green paroquets and woodpeckers, robins and mocking-birds. But in one of these Florida poems, "From the Flats," his true theme is the hills of Macon. The sands, now no longer revealing the grace of God, simply depress his spirits:

"What heartache—ne'er a hill!
Inexorable, vapid, vague and chill
The drear sand-levels drain my spirit low."

And he concludes with a vision of home:

> "Oh might I through these tears
> But glimpse some hill my Georgia high uprears,
> Where white the quartz and pink the pebble shine,
> The hickory heavenward strives, the muscadine
> Swings o'er the slope, the oak's far-falling shade
> Darkens the dogwood in the bottom glade,
> And down the hollow from a ferny nook
> Bright leaps a living brook!"

Whether in Florida or in Pennsylvania, or in the city of Baltimore, he always yearned for the beautiful countryside of his early years. He felt the contrast between life as he knew it—"the hottest of all battles"—and life as God seemed to intend it to be lived in so fair and so dreamy a land. If our destiny, he said, were such that life *could* be an idyl, surely this would be the place of places for it. The beauty of Macon won him from the start—the river, the great groves of oaks, the hills rising above the town. The gentle hills, with their constant variety and surprise, attracted him more perhaps than anything else; they were, as he pointed out, a happy compromise between the mountain ruggedness to the northwest and the monotonous seaboard levels to the southeast. A school that he attended for a time, the 'Cademy, stood in a grove of oaks and hickories. According to his brother, "Sidney was bright in his studies, but while parsing, reading, writing, and figuring, he was also chucking nuts from the tops of the tall trees, sympathizing with the dainty half-angel, half-animal flying squirrels, and drinking deep draughts of the love of nature from the cool, solacing oaks." On Saturdays they went to the woods "for a day among doves, blackbirds, robins, plovers, snipes, or rabbits," or they went fishing in the brook or river. Horseback riding, one of Lanier's favorite exercises through life and doubtless one of his early pleasures, carried him farther afield. His was indeed a happy boyhood in a cultivated and fairly prosperous family, with town sociabilities and country solitudes always at his disposal. A resident of Macon describes "the boundless hospitality of those times—a continual round of entertainments, musicals, and evening parties . . . horseback rides and boat rides during the day and piano-playing, singing, fluting, and impromptu cotillions and Virginia reels in the evening!" Books, too, were at his command, the best books, the library of a father who was fond of Shakspere, Addison, and Walter Scott, and the boy felt their potency to charm and inspire. At college not far from home—Oglethorpe College, at Midway, Georgia, a sufficiently isolated and dreamy place—he continued to read eagerly, as well as to master his studies, and in Professor Woodrow, a scientist, he found a valued friend with whom he rambled in the woods and fields, and through whom he received a tutorship after graduation.

Then there came to this remote college town and to this "spare-built boy" (so he describes himself) "of average height and underweight, mostly addicted to hard study, long reveries, and exhausting smokes with a German pipe" the impossible crash of cannon and the call to arms. Lanier fared forth, in the first Georgia company to go to Virginia, his dream of life as an idyl shattered forever.

Nature, music, books, all were now sacrificed. It is true that the war deepened his personality, which needed contact with the actual world, and that, after the war, he rose to the national point of view while most contemporary poets, North and South, remained sectional. Yet if the war brought on his fatal disease, as he believed it did, one must doubt whether the gain offset the loss. For his life became a heroic, unremitting struggle against poverty and disease, a struggle against odds that would have brought most men to the grave in a few years—odds that he, however, long faced successfully in his eagerness to secure happiness through self-expression. This is not, of course, the place for a description of the dark tapestry that fate wove for his life story. Its pattern is a chaotic mixture of defeat, success, depression, sharp suffering, hectic elation, and misdirected aspiration. Outwardly and inwardly his life was feverish; the deathbed composition of "Sunrise," one of his most remarkable poems, is symbolical. The visible result of such a life is destined to be pitifully inadequate: as the most harmonious hours of his life were mixed with discords, so his best poetry, his poetry of nature, is marred by glaring defects; and these defects perhaps forbid his classification with the foremost American writers on nature. Still, he contributes, as we have noted, what none of them contribute—the scenery of the South; and he alone reveals a musician's feeling for nature.

§ 2

Unlike many of our writers on the South, he grew out of it—was born in it, was shaped by it in those halcyon days in Georgia before the war, and came to know it, its length and breadth, in the course of his wanderings. His earliest playmates, so to speak, were the birds, the flowers, the trees of the Macon country; he did not need to "study" them. Though he was no naturalist, no scientist, he was keenly interested in the natural science of the nineteenth century—his copy of *Origin of Species,* for example, was carefully marked and annotated, and at one period he threw himself into microscopic study with characteristic fervor. He was not the type of sentimentalist who shuns knowledge; his error, rather, was a headlong pursuit of it.

Lanier was an accurate, if not professionally accurate, ornithologist and botanist. Of birds he names few—less than a score—in his poetry, and of these few none is quite adequately presented. There is the mocking-bird, of course. "To Our Mocking-bird," who "Died of a Cat, May, 1878," suffers from the severance of bird and nature, which Emerson condemned in "Each and All"; but we hear the song:

"Trillets of humor,—shrewdest whistle-wit,—
  Contralto cadences of grave desire
  . . . midnights of tone entire,—
  Tissues of moonlight shot with songs of fire;—
Bright drops of tune, from oceans infinite
Of melody, sipped off the thin-edged wave
And trickling down the beak,—discourses brave
  Of serious matter that no man may guess,—
  Good-fellow greetings, cries of light distress . . ."

Better is the sonnet "The Mocking-Bird," "yon trim Shakspere on the tree":

"Superb and sole, upon a plumèd spray
That o'er the general leafage boldly grew,
He summ'd the woods in song; or typic drew

The watch of hungry hawks, the lone dismay
Of languid doves when long their lovers stray,
And all birds' passion-plays that sprinkle dew
At morn in brake or bosky avenue.
Whate'er birds did or dreamed, this bird could say.
Then down he shot, bounced airily along
The sward, twitched in a grasshopper, made song
Midflight, perched, prinked, and to his art again.
Sweet Science, this large riddle read me plain:
How may the death of that dull insect be
The life of yon trim Shakspere on the tree?"

The weak line and a half on the mourning dove in the sonnet above—

"the lone dismay
Of languid doves when long their lovers stray"

—brings us to the only other bird that Lanier seemed devoted to. It is named more than twice as often as any other bird, and not merely because of the facile rhyme with "love." Lanier uses the bird as a symbol of love and of grief, as he explicitly says in the poem entitled "The Dove":

"Nay, if ye three, O Morn! O Spring! O Heart!
Should chant grave unisons of grief and love;
Ye could not mourn with more melodious art
Than daily doth yon dim sequestered dove."

"Dim sequestered dove" shows good observation; so do these lines from another poem:

"Like as a dove from out the gray sedge flies
To tree-tops green where cooes his heavenly mate."

Lanier's few flowers (something like a dozen) are mainly decorative and illustrative. In "The Symphony," for example:

> "A velvet flute-note fell down pleasantly
> Upon the bosom of that harmony,
> And sailed and sailed incessantly,
> As if a petal from a wild-rose blown
> Had fluttered down upon that pool of tone."

The rose is his perfect and regal flower; thus in Beethoven "bloomed the perfect rose of tone." Most frequent among his flowers are the violet and the lily, the flowers of sentimentalism as the dove is the bird of sentimentalism. Best of his poems on flowers is "Corn"—if one may classify it thus—the poem of the "stately corn-ranks" sixty miles north of Macon on the uplands within sight of the lower ranges of the Blue Ridge Mountains. As in most of Lanier's poetry, fancy tends to supplant imagination (the hill, for instance, being a "gashed and hairy Lear" that Spring, his Cordelia, cannot cheer), and diffuse phrasing weakens the feeling, as when he says that his eyes take as their harvest

> "inward dignities
> And large benignities and insights wise,
> Graces and modest majesties."

But, with all its lack of emotional governance, it has a certain largeness, a sense of insight and far vision, not perhaps always justified by a close examination, that brings one back to it gladly. One cannot call it a great poem, as some would do, simply because it embodied forty years ago an important agricultural lesson for the South; its value depends rather on its truth of vision and feeling, as in the lines that point across the vale

> "To where, beyond the mouldering mill,
> Yon old deserted Georgian hill
> Bares to the sun his piteous aged crest
> And seamy breast,
> By restless-hearted children left to lie
> Untended there beneath the heedless sky,
> As barbarous folk expose their old to die."

"Corn," like most of Lanier's best work, begins with a forest rhapsody. The feeling may be overwrought and sentimental, but beneath the restless striving for sensation and for expression is a strong deep love of trees such as one finds rarely in literature. In the dreaming beeches; in the young hickories ecstatic with urgency of burgeoning; in the great pines inwreathed with winding muscadines; in old companies of oaks forming high overhead a

> "veined complex of space
> Where sky and leafage interlace
> So close, the heaven of blue is seen
> Interwoven with a heaven of green";

—in all the trees of the forest he sees various beauty, hears "fragmentary whispers" and "vague purports sweet," feels the lingering touch of leaves like women's hands, and under and among them lives a new life.

In "The Marshes of Glynn" nearly fifty lines are given to a celebration of the live-oak woods from whose eloquent glooms he emerges to the sand beach only at the end of a whole day of delight and elevation among them: of delight among their intricate beauties of form and color, and elevation through their intoxicating yet easing purity of soul, for they are "Pure with a sense of the passing of saints through the wood." Still longer is the opening passage of "Sunrise." The whispering leaves of the live-oak will not let him sleep; they bring "a message of range and of sweep"; and he goes.

"I have come ere the dawn, O beloved, my live-oaks, to
hide
In your gospelling glooms,—to be
As a lover in heaven."

In his eager response he embraces the "burly-bark'd, man-bodied Tree" in the dark, and the tears rain from his eyes to the foot of the tree, and he calls upon the

"Friendly, sisterly, sweetheart leaves"

(nature being all in all to him) to give him light and guidance and to pray for him "a myriad prayer." In its undisciplined passion the whole passage reminds one of Richard Jefferies's uxorious love of nature.

In one of his prose works Lanier states his faith in the tree explicitly:

> "Who," he asks, "in some day when life seemed *too* bitter, when man has seemed too vile, when the world has seemed all old leather and brass, when some new twist of life has seemed to wrench the soul beyond all straightening,—who has not flown, at such a time, to the deep woods, and leaned against a tree, and felt his big arms outspread like the arms of the preacher that teaches and blesses, and slowly absorbed his large influences, and so recovered one's self as to one's fellow-men, and gained repose from the ministrations of the Oak and the Pine?"

Precisely the same conception he expressed in verse form in "A Ballad of Trees and the Master," in which Christ goes into the woods "clean forspent" and comes out "content," having been restored by the little gray olive leaves.

§ 3

As he felt toward the trees, so Lanier felt toward nature generally. Rightly understood, he says, she is more than Ariel and Ceres to Prospero, more than a wood-fetching Caliban to serve us—she is a "friend and comforter," and she is sweetly companionable, he suggests, even when we remember Death with Mr. Darwin. That is his statement in written prose, and very likely his spoken word would have been to the same effect; but in his poems his eagerness led him farther. Here he commonly addresses nature as a woman loved. She is his "sweetheart"; he is her "lover." He justifies himself historically:

" . . . a sweet Voice *Love thy neighbor* said;

. . . .

So, when man's arms had circled all man's race,
The liberal compass of his warm embrace
Stretched bigger yet in the dark bounds of space;
With hands a-grope he felt smooth Nature's grace,
Drew her to breast and kissed her sweetheart face."

That is the Christianity of a very loose constructionist; it is also the spirituality—if one may use the word at all in this connection—of a soul ever defeated yet ever aflame. Wordsworth has shown, with that serenity which is almost another term for spirituality, how nature may be regarded as the friend and comforter of man, and more than that. It is only the unbridled romanticists, such as Rousseau and Shelley and Jefferies, who have given their imagination freely to nympholeptic longing, and in Lanier's lines we have the *reductio ad absurdum* of the tendency. Nowhere else does he express this feeling so weakly as in the last two lines in the above passage; yet, unhappily, something of the same feeling vitiates even his best work, such as the "Hymns of the Marshes." There is every reason why a poet may at times regard nature as a woman, whether maid or wife or mother, but he need not abandon his mind to the fancy, or express it, as Lanier does, in terms specifically sentimental—"dear" and "sweet" and "sweetheart."

Yet it would be unfair to condemn this characteristic mood of Lanier's without remembering that in his case, as in that of Jefferies, it is in large measure the result of poverty, disease, and a desolating sense of defeat. Like Jefferies he came to associate happiness with nature, misery with man; his hectic delight and abandon constituted a reaction against the trials of man as a social creature. Coming to the city he is not only dazed, like most countrymen, but repelled: "I tell you," he writes to a friend, "the Heavens are alien to this town, and if it were anybody else but the Infinite God that owned them, he wouldn't let them bend so blue over here." During the years in which he wrote most of his poetry, nature was to Lanier mainly a refuge from the trials that he associated with his life in the midst of men. At West Chester, where he wrote "The Waving of the Corn," he lay

"Stretched prone in summer's mortal ecstasy" and addressed society with the bitterness of a nature foiled:

> "Ye terrible Towns, ne'er claim the trembling soul
> That, craftless all to buy or hoard or sell,
> From out your deadly complex quarrel stole
> To company with large amiable trees."

More explicit still is his denunciation of modern trade in "The Symphony." On its positive side a celebration of music and love, this characteristic poem is on its negative side a spirited condemnation of the false life that man has in this latter day (before the World War) chosen as his most certain good. Trade, "king of the modern days," is worse than war itself:

> " 'Tis only war grown miserly."

Hence his sense of freedom in nature, especially in the presence of the far-stretching marshes and sea, each a world in itself:

> "Free
> By a world of marsh that borders a world of sea."

There, amid spaces unbounded, the prisoned soul could find liberation and ecstasy in an expansive union with the great, wide scene. It is "a message of range and of sweep" that the live-oak leaves bring from the marsh and the main as he lies asleep, and he responds with a lover's haste. And it is the "range and sweep" of these Marsh Hymns that make them memorable.

Another freedom, that of art, he found refuge in from boyhood to the end. To be sure, art is also an exacting despot, or should be; but to Lanier it meant first of all unfettered self-expression in a world where *his* self, at least, was painfully confined.

As a boy, Lanier learned to play, virtually without tuition, every accessible kind of instrument—flute, piano, guitar, banjo, violin.[1] The violin stirred him as did no other instrument. "He has related that during his college days it would sometimes so exalt him in rapture, that presently he would sink from his solitary music-worship into a deep trance, thence to awake, alone, on the floor of his room, sorely shaken in nerve." But the instrument that he mastered was the flute. In *Tiger Lilies* he wrote of flute playing:

> "It is like walking in the woods, amongst wild flowers, just before you go into some vast cathedral. For the flute seems to me to be particularly the woods-instrument: it speaks the gloss of green leaves or the pathos of bare branches; it calls up the strange mosses that are under dead leaves; it breathes of wild plants that hide and oak fragrances that vanish."

Here, as often in his poems and letters, music and nature are interwoven. He was a convinced supporter of "program-music," even a creator of it. If the true musician is the artist who thinks and feels in terms of pure sound, certainly Lanier was no musician, for always the sound evoked mental images, usually images from nature. In a letter written in Baltimore in 1873, for example, he describes an orchestra concert in which he took part as flute player. After picturing the "Hunt of Henry IV," with its dainty lady, and cavaliers, and horn, and dogs, and pistol, and the stag dying "in a celestial concord of flutes, oboes, and violins," he exclaims: "Oh, how far off my soul was in this thrilling moment! It was in a rare, sweet glen in Tennessee, the sun was rising over a wilderness of mountains" and goes on to present an incident from which he says he was called back to his work as first flute player by the bâton and shouts and fanfares and gallopings "to the death."

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[1] "I could play passably well on several instruments before I could write legibly, and since then the very deepest of my life has been filled with music." (Letter to Hayne)

We need not concern ourselves here with the question whether Lanier was dominantly a musician or a poet. Certainly the effect of his passion for music is obvious in his poetry, as it is even more certainly in his theory of versification. It is not so much that his poetry is musical, in the ordinary sense, as Poe's poetry is musical, or Lanier's when he is Poesque:

"I fear me, I fear me yon dome of diaphanous gleam
Will break as a bubble o'er-blown in a dream."

In this sense, possibly the ever-charming "Song of the Chattahoochee," with its quiet simplicity and its feeling of river movement, is the most musical of his poems. In this sense, his work is not, on the whole, distinguished for its music, a good deal of it being harsh. Lanier's poems are musical, rather, because of the orchestral effect produced by such poems as "The Marshes of Glynn" and "Sunrise." Most poets are melodic; a few, conspicuously Milton, with his "organ quality," are harmonic; Lanier is sometimes orchestral. In the Marsh Hymns we hear, not one melody artfully varied, but a bewildering succession of winding and darting melodies; we are aware of a full, rich, complex background of sound, of crescendo and decrescendo restlessly alternating, of a rapid tempo bespeaking eagerness and wonder, relieved perhaps too rarely by a brief tranquil interlude; and everywhere words are poured out lavishly like so many notes, not so much expressing a meaning as illustrating it. And it all leads to that passionate definition at the very close:

"Music is love in search of a word."[1]

§ 4

In his *Poets of America* Stedman describes Lanier as "the Southerner nervous and eager, with dark hair and silken beard, features delicately moulded, pallid complexion, hands of the slender, white, artistic type." It is a vivid bit of description; but the epithet "Southerner" is scarcely suitable. He is, rather, a romanticist of a certain familiar type, aspiring, versatile, sensitive, expansive, devoted to beauty, repelled by modern life, capable, it would seem, of the highest happiness, but doomed, by disease and care, to enjoy the most fragmentary happiness and to suffer keenly. The conflict between head and heart that manifests itself in the romantic temperament throughout Lanier's century, he waged, too, as he indicates in "Acknowledgment":

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[1] Comparing Lanier and Whitman, E. C. Stedman remarks: "It is manifest that the two (as near and as different as Valentine and Orson) were moving in the same direction; that is, for an escape from conventional trammels to something free, from hackneyed time-beats to an assimilation of nature's larger rhythm—to limitless harmonies suggested by the voices of her winds and the diapason of her ocean billows."

"O Age that half believ'st thou half believ'st,
Half doubt'st the substance of thine own half doubt,
And, half perceiving that thou half perceiv'st,
Stand'st at thy temple door, heart in, head out!"

A body broken with disease, an emotional life lofty but rampant, and a mind incapable of bringing into harmony the parts of his nature—such was his endowment. But he had also genuine imagination and a love of all lovely things, and he knew how to give shape, if not perfect shape, to his vision.

CHAPTER VIII

MUIR

§ I

No doubt there are various reasons why John Muir, author, inventor, botanist, geologist, explorer, mountaineer, rancher, conservationist, wrote his first book when he was nearing sixty. The fundamental reason, however, is simply that he was too busy enjoying life to say much about it. Experience was to him not merely stuff for artistic essays or scientific monographs, still less material for carving an imposing career, but a thing to be sought for its own sake. He thought only—and how fervidly!—of beauty and knowledge; he was intoxicated with the various beauty of the world and with the perfection of its natural law. Like his contemporary Fabre, "the insects' Homer," he had the ecstasy of both the poet and the scientist. His prevailing attitude is one of wonder—not that of the undisciplined romanticist dissolved in a Byronic emotion "too deep for thought," but that of a true poet-naturalist, eager to analyze as well as enjoy nature's beauty and perfection. He was a poet well schooled in the discipline of facts.

Of course he had first of all the wonder of childhood, which is neither introspective nor inquiring, and he expressed it charmingly in his *Story of My Boyhood and*

Youth, one of the most absorbing autobiographies of our time.

Up to the age of eleven John Muir lived in Dunbar, beside the stormy North Sea, reveling in adventure and nature. From the straight and narrow ways of his Scotch home, presided over by the inflexible Daniel Muir, who required him to learn the entire New Testament and three fourths of the Old "by heart and by sore flesh," Johnnie Muir ran away to the shore and the fields. Many were the happy days he and his companions spent in listening to the skylarks, running ten or twenty miles at a stretch, watching the great storms beating on the headlands, climbing the craggy ruins of Dunbar Castle by the sea more daringly than in all his later thrilling mountaineering—climbing, too, on occasion, when his mother had left him sleeping like a gude bairn, on the gabled roof of his house while the howling wind made a balloon of his nightgown.

One night his father came to the boys studying by the fireside, saying, "Bairns, you needna learn your lessons the nicht, for we're gan to America the morn!" To the eager heart of youth it was a memorable summons. The long journey over, the family settled in Wisconsin, a dozen miles from Portage, before a lily-rimmed pond which they named Fountain Lake, and here, by dint of extraordinary energy, they soon established a prosperous farm. Eight years later they moved to a larger tract of land, and the relentless labor began once more; "even when sick we were held to our task as long as we could stand." John was put to the plough at the age of twelve, when his head scarcely reached above the handles. Alone he dug a well through fine-grained sandstone to a depth of ninety feet, doing all the work with chisels, chipping day after day for months, and all but losing his life, finally, in the carbonic acid gas at the bottom.

Yet he was radiantly happy. "Oh, that glorious Wisconsin wilderness! Everything new and pure in the very prime of the spring when Nature's pulses were beating highest and mysteriously keeping time with our own!" He never forgot the wild life of those days—the kingbird who fought as pluckily as the boys had fought in ancient Dunbar, the weird whippoorwill that came to the cabin door every night, the partridge mysteriously drumming in the depths of the woods, the multitudinous fireflies making the meadow throb with light on sultry evenings, the tranquil peep of the hylas and the bellowing of the bullfrogs, the white water lilies, admired by all the European settlers, the curious lady's-slippers and the Turk's-turbans, the brave anemone in the spring, the adhesive snow crystals, "like daisies," silently weaving an immaculate earth-blanket and transforming the landscape, the great Middle Western thunderstorms, unlike those of Scotland, marching terribly overhead and emitting zigzag lightning and sheets of rain and hail. To the countless wonders of nature his passionate youthful heart beat its glad response, all but oblivious of the tortures incident to "getting-on."

At the same time his mind was awakening, adventuring in the chaos of things and bravely seeking order. In spare minutes he studied mathematics, and read books procured with difficulty, much as Lincoln had done. When the rest of the family had gone to bed, he lingered in the kitchen to read till the inevitable command issued from his father's room, and thought himself lucky in stealing "nearly ten minutes, magnificent golden blocks of time," twice or thrice in a whole winter. Finally he contrived to get permission to rise early, which he interpreted to mean one o'clock, so that he found himself master of five solid hours before the day's labor began. These hours he spent, like the great Newton in his school days, in inventing ingenious machines—hygrometers, pyrometers, an early-or-late-rising machine, a self-setting sawmill, a clock that indicated the day of the week and month and started fires. At the age of twenty-two he took the advice of a neighbor who proposed that he should display his inventions at the State Fair in Madison, as a means of admission to the wide world. Laden with two clocks and a thermometer made of a piece of washboard, he climbed into the locomotive of a train and studied its machinery while it bore him on to the fair and success. The sight of students in the little university town having keenly roused his appetite for education, he entered the University of Wisconsin, where by means of money earned in the summers, he managed to spend four years in devising ingenious machines and in studying. Without seeking a diploma, he took courses independently, especially in natural science.

His first scientific passion was botany; never the research laboratory botany of our day, but the study of plants in the field. After leaving the university he acquainted himself with the flora of the southern Great Lakes region, and in 1867 set out on a botanical tramp to the South, which is recorded in *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf,* often going supperless and breakfastless, and sleeping out of doors without a blanket, made happy, nevertheless, by the great oaks of Kentucky, the noble many-domed mountains of North Carolina, the piny plains of Georgia, and the lightsome palms of Florida. In Florida he became desperately ill, and when the fever left him he was seriously weakened. Nothing daunted, he sailed for Cuba. Here his health failed to return, and he was obliged to give up his foolish dream of walking through the jungles of South America along the Andes to a tributary of the Amazon, and then floating down that river on a raft all the way to the Atlantic.

Then, in 1868, he traveled to the Pacific Coast, where he was to spend his happiest and most productive years. "What is the nearest way out of town?" he inquired in San Francisco, bewildered, intent only on making his escape, and he was soon on his way to the austere loveliness of the Sierra Nevada. Now began those glorious months between the head waters of the Tuolumne and the Merced rivers described in one of Muir's most charming volumes, *My First Summer in the Sierra.* The years immediately following, Muir, more and more blessed, passed "in the third heaven of the Sierra," ever afterward his best-loved mountains of any in the world, acting as guide now and then, or tending a sawmill, or otherwise maintaining life, and meanwhile eagerly roaming and seeing, sketching and noting, pressing flowers, and studying the tell-tale rocks. The grand, bare, craggy mountains, unlike anything he had seen in the elevated sinuosities of the Southern Appalachian system, challenged his scientific instincts and his poetic delight in the great powers of nature so urgently that by comparison his fern-fretted dales of Wisconsin must have seemed tame if lovable. Henceforth he was a seeker after the sublime.

Partly in order to see the Great Basin, Muir joined the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1876, and soon found himself on speaking terms with the strange country of Nevada and Utah, described in *Steep Trails.* He also came to know, and described in this book, the dark forests and snowy mountains of Oregon and Washington. In 1879 he went to Alaska to study glaciers, and subsequently made repeated voyages thither; none of the selections from his journal is more interesting than *Travels in Alaska.* In 1881 he was a member of the Arctic relief expedition in search of De Long, which took him well up in Behring Sea and across to Siberia, a voyage described in *The Cruise of the Corwin.* Other travels gave him a knowledge of nature in Central America, in South America, in South Africa, in Switzerland and Norway, in India and the Philippines, in Australia and New Zealand. There was little of the world that he did not know at first hand, and apparently he was everywhere at home.

§ 2

He was emphatically at home in mountainous country. "I am hopelessly and forever a mountaineer," he wrote to a friend. The beauty of mountains entranced the poet and artist in him; their flora and rock structure roused his scientific instincts; their dangers called into action his keen zest for adventure. Never, perhaps, has there been such a complete mountaineer and glacier-climber as he, unsurpassed alike in skill, in knowledge, in passionate enjoyment. Alone and in all weathers, he penetrated forlorn wildernesses never before traversed by man. No one who had seen him could forget his tall, lean, bearded figure mounting upward, his blue eyes absorbing everything. Sinewy as a wild animal, he often climbed in his shirt-sleeves, with never a thought of a pack train—carrying only a bag of bread, a bit of tea and a tin cup to steep it in, his notebook, and his scientific instruments (thermometer, barometer, and clinometer). The professional climber, to whom mountaineering is merely a sport, was never a match for him in skill and resourcefulness. Accompanied by at least two guides, such a climber relies upon the rope that unites the party to save any one that may slip on a grassy or icy slope or plunge into a crevasse. Unless all slip or plunge together, all are reasonably safe, however perilous their course may appear in a thrilling photograph or breathless magazine article. Such mountaineering is a cheap accomplishment in comparison with Muir's solitary climbs. In all his years of rambling over all kinds of mountains and glaciers, there was ever the chance that his first slip would be his last. Tireless, accustomed to every privation, nearly independent of food and shelter, buoyed by an indomitable will, superior to giddiness when standing on the verge of an abyss thousands of feet deep, he roamed among the high mountains very much like the wild sheep and goats. Renouncing his usual logical processes, he let his body take care of itself; "one's body seems to go where it likes," he said, "with a will over which we seem to have scarce any control." Mountaineering thus became an unconscious art rather than a science.

Muir had few adventures, because adventures, as he remarked, are usually misadventures. Reading a magazine essay by an ardent young climber, who detailed his exciting perils in the ascent of Mount Tyndall, Muir remarked: "He must have given himself a lot of trouble. When I climbed Tyndall, I ran up and back before breakfast." In his many years of wandering he faced fewer critical situations than the ordinary sporting climber would face in a season or two. A single instance must suffice—his terrible night on Mount Shasta, recounted with remarkable vividness in *Steep Trails*. With Jerome Fay, a guide, he started for the summit from the timber-line camp at two in the morning. They detected no signs of a storm till they had attained the summit, from which they witnessed the clouds forming for the fray in the morning sun down in the valleys—"a sky of spotless blue above, a sky of glittering cloud beneath." Although recognizing the danger of being caught on the summit in a great storm, they stayed long enough to make an observation of the barometer at three P.M., by which time the storm had begun. The thermometer fell below zero; darkness as of night came on speedily; a terrific wind boomed and surged; lightning flashes cut the darkness, stroke following stroke "as though the mountain were being rent to its foundations." To return to the timber-line camp was now impossible, and for want of a better refuge Muir and Jerome found their way against the wind to the "Hot Springs":

> " 'Here,' said Jerome, as we shivered in the midst of the hissing, sputtering fumaroles, 'we shall be safe from frost.' 'Yes,' said I, 'we can lie in this mud and steam and sludge, warm at least on one side; but how can we protect our lungs from the acid gases, and how, after our clothing is saturated, shall we be able to reach camp without freezing, even after the storm is over?' "

For seventeen hours they lay frozen, scalded, famished, fatigued, benumbed, crusted with snow, like fallen angels in hell, fearful of the carbonic acid gas, calling each other by name "in a frightened, startled way, each fearing the other might be benumbed or dead. . . . The weary hours wore away like dim, half-forgotten years, so long and eventful they seemed, though we did nothing but suffer":

> "'Are you suffering much?' Jerome would inquire with pitiful faintness. 'Yes,' I would say, striving to keep my voice brave, 'frozen and burned; but never mind, Jerome, the night will wear away at last, and to-morrow we go a-Maying, and what camp fires we will make, and what sunbaths we will take!'"

Day did dawn; the pale light stole down the ridge to the hollow where they lay; the bitter frost lost its power; at length they were able to struggle to their feet and start feebly homeward. When they had descended three thousand feet, the sun on their backs was strong enough to restore some of their terribly depleted energy; and soon after, Muir returned to the gay lilies and larkspurs and the warm brown boles of the pines as one restored from a desolate limbo of the sky.

§ 3

In his wanderings over the fair face of the world, especially its rugged mountains and glaciers, John Muir was by no means a sentimentalist or a trifler. He was a distinguished field naturalist; he belongs to a type virtually unknown before the time of the gentleman-naturalist of Selborne, and he ranked high among the men of his type in his day. He knew the mountains of California not only more intimately, but more correctly, physiographically speaking, than any other scientist; he knew their flora, particularly the pines, as did no other botanist; he knew regions of Alaska, especially certain inlets, as did no other geographer; he knew thoroughly the small glaciers of the Sierras and the great glaciers of Alaska—knew glaciers in general, for that matter, better than any other geologist of his time. It is unfortunate for his fame as a scientist that he did not organize and utilize his knowledge after the accepted fashion; he cared little about preparing contributions to the scholarly journals, and he refused offers to immure himself in Eastern universities. But he knew that he knew more than others of higher scientific ranking, and we know it.

Though he became primarily a geologist after reaching the grand rock scenery of the Sierras, he had begun his scientific studies as a botanist. Like the poet Lanier, he loved trees more than other green things; he was fascinated by the pines of the Sierra, the petrified forests of Arizona, the eucalyptus groves of Australia, the banyan trees of India. With Professor Sargent he made an expedition to the Far East for the purpose of studying trees. Flowers, however, were better adapted to what his friend Young termed his "amatory botany." In his delightful book *Alaska Days with John Muir* this "adventurous evangelist" gives a pretty picture of Muir running from one cluster of flowers to another, kneeling before them eagerly, "prattling a curious mixture of scientific lingo and baby talk":

> "'Ah! my blue-eyed darlin', little did I think to see you here. How did you stray away from Shasta? . . .

"'And who might you be, now, with your wonder look?
Is it possible that you can be (two Latin polysyllables)?
You're lost, my dear, you belong in Tennessee.'"

And he thrust his dear friends into his pockets and shirt front till he was sprouting all over. Such prattle was never mere gushing, however; for, unlike most amatory botanizers, he really knew his loved plants: loved them and knew them as Fabre loved and knew the insects of his *harmas.*

As geologist, he loved the cold rocks. The earth had written; the records were all there, only a little blurred—"a collection of stone books," as he says, "covering thousands of miles of shelving, tier on tier, conveniently arranged for the student"; it was a joy to wander among these stone books and to read with a mind warmed to the task of interpretation. Their oracular messages stirred him profoundly; the cold rocks pulsed with life as he brooded over them; his study became communication, and all the wondrous past leaped before him in clear vision, by day and by night. The mountains were not, to him, "everlasting," but cloud-like, forming in grand folds and domes and melting away again, and he saw the whole process. The part that earthquakes play in these mutations interested him without awakening fear: "A noble earthquake!" he would exclaim, and go to see what happened. In *The Yosemite* he tells how, awakened at two o'clock one morning by a "strange, thrilling motion," he hurried out to make observations while the earth-ship was heaving and tossing so that he could scarce walk her decks. He saw thousands of tons of solid rock tumbled into fragments, with a roar as of all the thunder he had ever heard: "the whole earth was, like a living creature, calling to its sister planets." He wanted to go to the west coast of South America to study earthquakes, but he was too busy with his glaciers.

Before Muir's studies in California, it had been supposed that the Yosemite and other gorges had been formed during terrific earthquakes. But Muir proved that the true explanation was glacier action. He traced the paths of old glaciers everywhere in this region, and discovered many residual, or "living," glaciers where authoritative scientists had declared none existed. In *The Mountains of California* is an account of how in 1871, one October day of goldenrod and orange-yellow poplars, coming upon a suspicious deposit of fine gray mud, he traced to its lair in a shadowy amphitheater the Black Mountain Glacier and greeted it with a shout. At the uppermost crevasse, or *Bergschrund,* where the glacier breaks away from the *névé,* he made his way into a weird underworld:

> "Its chambered hollows were hung with a multitude of clustered icicles, amid which pale, subdued light pulsed and shimmered with indescribable loveliness. Water dripped and tinkled overhead, and from far below came strange, solemn murmurings from currents that were feeling their way through veins and fissures in the dark. The chambers of a glacier are perfectly enchanting, notwithstanding one feels out of place in their frosty beauty. I was soon cold in my shirt-sleeves, and the leaning wall threatened to engulf me; yet it was hard to leave the delicious music of the water and the lovely light."

From that day onward, he gave more time to glaciers than anything else, studying their movements, trends, moraines, crevasses, meadows, lakes, rock carvings, and burnishings intelligently, patiently, heroically. Alone in the higher Sierras summer after summer, he labored till he mastered the range from glacierless Whitney north to Shasta, "a huge palimpsest," with its three glaciers. Then he worked in Alaska, in Switzerland, in Norway. In Alaska he became acquainted with glaciers in comparison with which those of the Sierras were mere toys, including the Muir Glacier, which he was the first white man to see. Everywhere he measured, recorded, sketched, accumulating knowledge at a prodigious rate, studying the laws of nature in wonderment at the perfection of the flowing world, tracing cause and effect in all their deftly woven complexity.

§ 4

But nature, to John Muir, was vastly more than matter permeated with law. Had he looked upon it so, he might have been a more productive scientist; but he regarded it, instead, as the unspeakably beautiful work of a loving creator, and consequently produced books that are only secondarily scientific, and primarily literary. More and more, as time goes on, and as later botanists, geographers, physiographers, and geologists supplement Muir's studies till they are covered over with accretions, as if they belonged to an earlier geological age, we shall go to such books as *The Mountains of California*, *Our National Parks*, and *My First Summer in the Sierra* for a living and accurate picture of the Great West such as no one else is likely soon to duplicate.

Muir emphasized several causes that make it impossible for most men to look upon nature, with him, as the unspeakably beautiful work of a loving creator, the temple of God in which man may worship. One cause is fear. Men are afraid of nature. They will sometimes venture into the wilderness when they can lean on each other, but to entrust their precious selves to cruel nature alone is too much. Yet, as Muir points out, all the "dangers" of the wilderness—all the colds, fevers, Indians, bears, snakes, "bugs," impassable rivers, jungles of brush, and quick and sure starvation—are either imaginary or grossly exaggerated, and even if they are not, amount to nothing in comparison with the dangers of living indoors in crowded cities. If a man is in good health to begin with, there is nowhere such physical well being as in the kindly wilderness. A wise man will perceive that frightful canyons and glacier crevasses are part of an orderly whole; that a great storm is "a cordial outpouring of Nature's love"; that all, indeed, "that we in our unbelief call terrible" is really an expression of the divine love.

Another cause for the blindness of men is the mistaken conception of nature as existing for man's use. Blandly asserting that nature was made for man's material needs—sheep for his clothing, oil for lighting his dark ways, lead for his bullets—most men cherish a curious view of the importance of man. Man is only one of many creatures, and the Lord loves them all. "The creation of all for the happiness of one" seems to this fellow-countryman of Adam Smith an inequitable arrangement of the universe: instead he proposes as the probable object "the happiness of each one of them," and goes on to confute his opponents by pointing out that this earth-ship on which we proudly sail had made many a successful journey round the heavens before *Homo sapiens* was created, and that things may be conducted very satisfactorily after man has disappeared from the world. Why, then, he asks, should man value himself as more than one small part of the great whole? Man is not distinct from, not above nature, but a part of it with his brother winds and rocks, all alike "fashioned with loving care" and all equally admirable.

Still another cause is the meanness of man. Man has desecrated not only nature but himself. More and more men live in cities, dirty, ugly, and morally impure cities. If they live in the country it is perhaps only to seek wealth in sheep, and the shepherd type is produced, living in many-voiced nature but hearing only "baa"! "Even the howls and ki-yis of coyotes might be blessings if well heard, but he hears them only through a blur of mutton and wool, and they do him no good." Or they become gold miners, hardy, adventurous, blazing a trail to nature's utmost fastnesses in disregard of dangers innumerable, as bold as Muir himself tracing his glaciers to their lairs in the mountains—but always blind to the beauty they desecrate, utterly deaf in their immorality, to the celestial love-music of nature. Beholding what God has made of nature, we may indeed deplore what man has made of man. One of the noblest of men, Emerson, Muir terms the sequoia of the human race, yet makes us feel that compelled to choose between the two, he would have discarded the man and kept the tree. The same choice he made more broadly in constantly quoting, as his ministerial friend Young tells us he did, Wordsworth's famous stanza:

"One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can."

Beauty and love in nature, then, we shall see only if emancipated from fear, utilitarianism, and meanness of soul. That Muir was never threatened by any one of the three is manifest from his books and the story of his life. Others have responded to nature more profoundly, but none with more rampant enthusiasm. The wealth of one mountain day was enough to make him run home in the moonlight happy beyond words, and he recorded such days in his journal with a lover's abandon. According to Young, his constant exclamation on beholding a fine landscape was, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!" It was a never-failing cause of surprise and gratitude to him "to think that He should plan to bring us feckless creatures here at the right moment, and then flash such glories at us." In his first summer in the Sierra, upon seeing a certain view he shouted and gesticulated so extravagantly that the sheep-dog Carlo came up to him with the most ludicrous puzzled expression in his eyes, and a brown bear in the thicket ran away in a panic, tumbling over the manzanita bushes in his haste. He was so enamoured of the Sierras that he asserted that he would be content among them forever if tethered to a stake; and with more literal truth, he said that, if it were not for the need of bread, civilization would never see him again. In his enthusiasm for all of God's handiwork he refused to kill animals for food, and even spared the rattlesnakes that he encountered—after all, they were not *his* snakes.

Rapt away by his enthusiasm, Muir enjoyed many hours when his scientific pursuits were laid aside, together with the whole of his rational impedimenta, and his personality was freely immersed in the landscape. Like the bees and butterflies, he would "lave in the vital sunshine, too richly and homogeneously joy-filled to be capable of partial thought," till he became "all eye, sifted through and through with light and beauty." Intoxicated with the champagne water, distilled air, and his own glad animal movements, it seemed to him that beauty entered, not through the eyes alone, but through all his flesh, like heat radiating from a camp-fire, "making a passionate, ecstatic pleasure-glow not explainable," as if his flesh-and-bone tabernacle were transparent as glass to the beauty surrounding it, "truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sun—a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal"—immortal because life now seemed neither long nor short, and time meant no more to him than to the trees and stars. In such hours Muir was impressed with the familiarity of natural objects, their human warmth; "no wonder," he says, "when we consider that we have the same Father and Mother." Yet he never went so far as to maintain that, in such hours, he was laid asleep in body and became, with Wordsworth, a living soul privileged to "see into the life of things." It was not spiritual insight that he enjoyed, but a pleasure-glow, a pure sensation, not a sensation exalted by thought; his body, deliciously alive, pulsed with nature. What we might call the human element in man had not been transcended but simply omitted.

Muir was inclined to think that man is at his best, not when he is most human, but when he is most natural.

§ 5

But one does not go to John Muir for a criticism of life. He understood neither the heights and depths of his own nature, which he avoided as most of us avoid the dizzy heights and depths of the material world, nor the complexities of social life—the boundless results of man's being a gregarious animal. When Emerson said of him that he was greater than Thoreau, he must have been thinking, not of Thoreau the moralist, but of Thoreau the naturalist. It is as a literary naturalist that Muir is perhaps greater than Thoreau and certainly equal to Burroughs. Knowing his facts perfectly, he had the capacity to present them not only with truth but also with charm. His description of nature—and most of his writing is merely description—has a degree of vividness that reminds one of those ocularly-minded masters of his day, Carlyle and Ruskin.

His sensuous perception, like Thoreau's, was unspoiled by tobacco or liquor—he drank only tea and mountain water. Then, he had a good plastic sense, saw the compositions of nature with an artist's eye, throwing up his arms for a frame, and often sketching in order to commemorate a scene or to bolster up his geological notes. But far more important than his sensuous alertness and æsthetic appreciation was his enthusiasm—his passionate absorption in nature's law and nature's beauty. He had, as we began by saying, the ecstasy of both the scientist and the poet, and it is this ecstasy, more than anything else, that gives power to his account of natural appearances.

Everywhere his enthusiasm revealed to him the principle of life. His landscape is ever "filled with warm God"; it is a living, breathing, moving landscape, rather than so much expressionless matter outstaring the beholder. His clouds, his very rocks, are instinct with life. A primrose by the river's brim was to him far more than a primrose. An ordinary drop of rain was no less than this: "a silvery newborn star with lake and river, garden and grove, valley and mountain, all that the landscape holds reflected in its crystal depths, God's messenger, angel of love sent on its way with majesty and pomp and display of power that make man's greatest shows ridiculous." In imagination he followed each drop, some penetrating to the roots of meadow plants, some shivered to dust through the pine needles, some drumming the broad leaves of veratrum or saxifrage, some plunging straight into fragrant corollas, or into the lake, dimpling it daintily, some flinging themselves into the wild heart of falls or cascades eager to take part in the dance and the song. He remembered without an effort that everything called "destruction" in nature is really creation, a passage from one use to another, one form of beauty to another. The immobile and changeless face of nature, which appals the unimaginative visitor, was to him replete with fascinating alteration.

Partly for this reason his descriptions of moving water, and storms, and the aurora borealis are usually his best work. The rain-storms of Alaska and the thunder-storms of the Sierras he described with power again and again; perhaps the best of his storm descriptions, however, is the wonderful chapter on "A Wind-Storm in the Forests," which bathes the reader with thrilling light, intoxicates him with piny fragrance, and exhilarates him with pure air and swaying, straining motion. Perched for hours in the top of a Douglas spruce "with muscles firm braced, like a bobolink on a reed," swaying backward and forward, round and round, describing every capricious curve in the air, closing his eyes now and then to enjoy the music the better, or to drink in the tonic fragrance of chafed pine boughs, Muir experienced novel sensations—became, for the time, a pinecrest passive but thrilled by the booming wind. He watched the play of light over the forest billowing like summer grain, he listened to the orchestra of the pines—the deep bass of the naked branches, the shrill hiss and silken murmur of the needles. And he described what he saw and heard with a combination of accurate perceptiveness and bounding emotion that is truly memorable.

Nor does one soon forget the supernal beauty of the aurora at the close of *Travels in Alaska.* Wrapped in his blankets, lying on a glacial moraine, Muir spent an entire night watching "a glowing silver bow spanning the Muir Inlet in a magnificent arch right under the zenith . . . the ends resting on the top of the mountain walls":

> "so brilliant, so fine and solid and homogeneous in every part, I fancy that if all the stars were raked together into one windrow, fused and welded and run through some celestial rolling-mill, all would be required to make this one glowing white colossal bridge. . . . At length while it yet spanned the inlet in serene and unchanging splendor, a band of fluffy, pale gray, quivering

ringlets came suddenly all in a row over the eastern mountain-top, glided in nervous haste up and down the under side of the bow and over the western mountain-wall. . . . Had these lively auroral fairies marched across the fiord on the top of the bow instead of shuffling along the under side of it, one might have fancied they were a happy band of spirit people on a journey making use of the splendid bow for a bridge."

And so on through several pages of delicately sensitive description.

Where there is action, where there is a narrative element in description, as in Muir's account of moving water, roving storms, and evanescent Northern lights, the picture is held together by the cohesive quality of the subject itself. But, as Lessing demonstrated long ago, where this chronological thread is wanting, the picture easily falls apart, one group of details canceling another group, so that the total impression is a blur or a blank. Sheer description in literature is indeed dangerous, now as in the eighteenth century, and yet the suffusion of modern descriptive passages with imagination—not a conspicuous commodity in the age of prose and reason—has gone far to justify "pen portraits" and literary landscape-painting. In Muir's writing, thanks to his kindling imagination, one rarely feels that he is going beyond the boundaries of literature and foolishly competing with the painter; a principle of life animates all his work—life in the thing seen, life in the seer.

Nowhere does this principle of life manifest itself more strikingly than in the fresh, free-ranging figures of speech that are nearly certain to illuminate his scenes wherever they are in danger of being darkened with words. The muddy floods that rush down the gorges and gulches during a shower roar "like lions rudely awakened, each of the tawny brood actually kicking up a dust at the first onset." The mountain tarns in early summer "begin to blink and thaw out like sleepy eyes." The hairs of the squirrel's tail quiver in the breeze "like pine-needles." In the dry weather of midsummer in the lower part of the Sierra "the withered hills and valleys seem to lie as empty and expressionless as dead shells on a shore." Muir's metaphors and similes are abundant, new, and apt; they reveal because they proceed from the poet in him.

Life, too, results from his frequent use of onomatopœia. His very words become sentient and mimic the mood of the moment. There are obvious instances everywhere, and also subtle ones that easily escape notice. This is obvious (the topic is icebergs on the Pacific coast):

> "Nearly all of them are swashed and drifted by wind and tide back and forth in the fiords until finally melted by the ocean water. . . ."

In the following, the contrast between two types of motion is emphasized by the word sounds:

> "Butterflies, too, and moths . . .; some wide-winged like bats, flapping slowly and sailing in easy curves; others like small flying violets shaking about loosely in short zigzag flights."

One more, in which the style reflects perfectly the quiet grace of the deer:

> "Deer give beautiful animation to the forests, harmonizing finely in their color and movements with the gray and

brown shafts of the trees and the swaying of the branches as they stand in groups at rest, or move gracefully and noiselessly over the mossy ground about the edges of beaver-meadows and flowery glades, daintily culling the leaves and tips of the mints and aromatic bushes on which they feed."

This means of adding to verisimilitude is not rare in Muir's style, but is, rather, a normal method. In all his description he seems to have felt, more than most writers do, that the sound of his phrases and sentences must carry a large part of the sense, and this is clearly one reason why his description is impressive.

Finally, he attained life through speed. His language does not emerge soberly, but flings itself out and hastens on as if word pursued word, sentence pursued sentence, like the pouring notes of a musical composition that rush over every obstacle to their triumph. This is not to say that he wrote with facility, since we know that he did not. "Very irksome" he pronounced "this literary business"; he worked laboriously, rewriting many of his most poetical chapters repeatedly. Hard writing often makes easy reading, and indeed no style could be much simpler than Muir's. It is perhaps too simple, too unvaried, too coördinated, too breathless in its persistent predication, so that one longs to stop, now and then, to rest and muse. At times his style has the melody and the imaginative magnificence of Ruskin, but the melody is rarely swelling, the magnificence rarely deep and reserved. Both Muir and Ruskin were nourished on the Bible and knew most of it by heart, and both became ardent admirers of nature and described her beauties with a lover's eye for detail; but whereas Muir became a scientist, Ruskin became a critic of life in several distinct fields; his work is therefore reflective. It is Muir's lack of reflection, betrayed by his restless, hurried style, that prevented his attaining a high position in our literature. Accurate and enthusiastic description of nature will go far, but no matter how remarkably accurate and enthusiastic, it cannot reach preëminence without the deeper elements infused by the mind and the spirit.

Even as description, then, his work suffers from its comparative superficiality. Yet who has described *what* Muir described *as* he described it? The human life of the West has been frequently pictured in our literature, most notably perhaps by Parkman and Bret Harte and Joaquin Miller. Their West is, however, a thing of the past, recognized as such by Muir decades ago; those trying times of the pioneers, he exclaims, have already become "dim as if a thousand years had passed over them." Parkman, Harte, and Miller, moreover, did not present the physical aspect of the West adequately—the physical West is exacting because it is so wonderful. Perhaps John Muir's treatment of it, persistently divorced from the human life of the region, is also inadequate; perhaps in time it will be superseded. Yet to-day it remains the most telling description we have of a part of America that has become steadily more important in the development of our continental democracy.

Whoever would know the Far West, from Alaska to Mexico, from the Coast to the Rockies, must know John Muir. Of course, he could scarcely master and reveal with equal distinctness all of this tremendous area. But the part that he knew by heart and described with greatest power is itself large—the National Parks, and the Sierras from giant Whitney to giant Shasta, his beloved "Range of Light," as he preferred to call it, the most beautiful mountains he had climbed in all his wanderings. The purple and gold of the valley flowers massed as perhaps nowhere else in the world; the lovely foothills penetrated with water coursing from the glaciers and snowbanks above; the breathless sublimities of the high mountains, whether storm-shrouded, or shining in the white light with a clearness surpassed nowhere, or flushing with the tender rosy alpenglow as if awaiting a vespertine benediction; the wild, tossing landscape seen from above, with only the sky overhead, a nerve-trying chaos unless one's conviction of nature's order and goodness be like Muir's; the roaring of many waters, the crack and boom of avalanches, the many-mooded winds, singing or flowing softly or beating with passion; the naked rocks, weather-worn through ages, their recorded history opening up the procession of time; the wild sheep, demonstrators of the impossible, "unworn and perfect as if created on the spot"; the brave little water ouzel, Muir's darling comrade in the wildest canyons and gorges, living unconcerned and singing sweetly in the spray of thunderous waters; the Douglas squirrel of the pine woods, vibrant in every atom, the accomplished mocking-bird of squirrels; the wonderful trees, the sugar pine, the nut pine, the Douglas spruce, the white silver fir, the red fir, all of them as beautiful and grand as any in America, and the monarch of them all, the famous *Sequoia gigantea,* over three hundred feet high, swaying in the Sierra winds when Christ walked in Palestine.

In his *Mountains of California, Our National Parks,* *The Yosemite, My First Summer in the Sierra,* Muir gave this region to the country—both to those who could not go to see and to those who, having eyes, saw not. That is his foremost achievement. And in a more literal sense may it be said that he gave this region to the country, for it was he, more probably than any other one man, who was responsible for the adoption of our policy of national parks.

CHAPTER IX

BURROUGHS

§ 1

Since the death of Thoreau in 1862, the outstanding American prose writers on nature, among an ever-gathering host, have been John Muir and John Burroughs. Set apart by their union of scientific accuracy with power of expression, these two writers have established a virtually new type of literature, the nature essay. As a naturalist, Muir was superior to Burroughs, by virtue of his more systematic studies and more important additions to our knowledge; as a writer, however, he was less certainly superior, since both of them display not only an admirable capacity for penetrating description but also a prevailing negligence of both the architectonics and the detail of literary form. Of the two, Burroughs published far more abundantly and steadily, so that he has perhaps impressed the American public as Muir, with all his personal charm, never did, though Burroughs's preëminence may be attributed in no small measure to his having become, like Thoreau, a *genius loci*. While Muir was wandering alone in the wilderness, or rather a dozen wildernesses, Burroughs, happily secluded in one of his successive hermitages, attracted pilgrims without number—nature lovers true and false, Burroughs clubs, Vassar girls, cyclists, artists, authors, reporters, children, old men—all of whom found him accessible and picturesque, and many of whom subsequently celebrated the object of their pilgrimage in a magazine or newspaper article. They came seeking not so much a poet-naturalist, whom they might better have found in Muir, as a natural philosopher, one of the sages of this latter day whose wisdom was authenticated by his equability and his closeness to the soil. While Muir, with his buoyant vitality, reminded his acquaintances of the Douglas squirrel that won his heart, Burroughs seems rather akin to the phlegmatic woodchuck—his last retreat he named not inappropriately "Woodchuck Lodge." There, a half mile from the old Burroughs homestead, he mused over the past, rambled through the fields and woods of his boyhood, and wrote, in a hay-barn study, when the spirit moved. In Jamaica, in the West, in Hawaii, in Alaska (Muir's beloved Alaska), he was out of his element, a woodchuck caged, and all his literary powers forsook him. A son of the soil more truly even than Whittier—his farmer ancestors stretching back in unbroken succession into the seventeenth century—he remained a part of the soil far more than did Whittier; the old farm things were indeed, as he said, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.

"Ah! the Past! the Past has such a hold on me!" In John Burroughs, Whittier's sentiment of the home and of boyhood days in the country becomes an insatiable nostalgia. For home will no longer satisfy the craving for home: "It almost amounts to a disease," says Burroughs, "this homesickness which home cannot cure—a strange complaint. Sometimes when away from the old scenes it seems as if I must go back to them, as if I should find the old contentment and satisfaction there in the circle of the hills. But I know I should not—the soul's thirst can never be slaked. My hunger is the hunger of the imagination. Bring all my dead back again, and place me amid them in the old home, and a vague longing and regret would still possess me." Although at bottom this yearning is not for home, but for something larger that we must try to define in this chapter, the higher values of home are a part of it, as Burroughs instinctively felt.

§ 2

Let us bring the "dead back again," and place the boy John amid them in the old homestead in the circle of the hills. Living there we find Grandfather Burroughs, a thrifty, Bible-reading, Old-School Baptist; Grandmother Burroughs, who worked with him in the fields; Grandfather Kelly, a Celtic dreamer who believed in spooks, "not a good provider" except of trout, which he caught with the boy till past eighty; and Grandmother Kelly, a practical housewife and the mother of ten children. Then the boy's father, red-haired and freckled, a good man, notable for truth, duty, and kindness, as well as for his lack of manners ("I doubt if he ever said 'Thank you' in his life") and his intolerance in politics and religion. One of the boy's earliest recollections is hearing his Baptist father dispute with a Methodist neighbor: "Time after time they would confront each other, and the long winter night there in the old kitchen would be filled with the din of their earnest, often angry, debate." Nor could the boy forget hearing his father pray in the hog-pen—so ardently that John took to his heels. Apparently religion absorbed the whole of his father's emotional life, since he had no æsthetic susceptibilities for literature or for nature. To his mother, John Burroughs traces his love of nature and his brooding temperament. Bearing ten children, like her mother before her, she toiled incessantly at the distaff, the quill-wheel, the spinning-wheel, the reel, the crackle, the swingle, and the hetchel, in addition to butter-making (above two tons annually) and countless other occupations of a self-contained household; "an heroic worker," as her son says. She loved animals, and all nature, laboring hard at her churning in order to win an hour in quest of wild berries. Of his brothers Burroughs tells us that, like their male ancestors generally, they were "home-bodies, rather timid, non-aggressive men . . . the kind of men that are so often crowded to the wall"; he feels himself closest to Hiram, "who was always going West, but never went; who always wanted some plaything—fancy sheep or pigs or poultry; . . . who was curious about strange lands, but who lost heart and hope as soon as he got beyond the sight of his native hills." "I have at times," says Burroughs, "his vagueness, his indefiniteness, his irresolution, and his want of spirit when imposed upon."

Aside from its tendency to softness of moral fiber, such a family provided a not unpromising beginning for a writer of books. It was substantial country stock, active and emotional if not intellectual, firmly attached to this world and, in some instances, to the other world. Equally fortunate for a writer on nature was the reposeful countryside itself, with its flowing mountain lines and long valleys, somewhat like those of the English Lake region, neither featureless nor forbiddingly wild—ancient Catskill ranges merging into humanized farm lands. "The old farm bending over the hills and dipping down into the valleys, the woods, the streams, the springs, the mountains, and Father and Mother under whose wings I was so protected, and all my brothers and sisters—how precious the thought of them all!" The house rested at the foot of a smooth hill, a thigh of Old Clump, whose vast form interposed shelter against harsh winds; the broad back of the hill itself, made up of decomposed red sandstone, glowing "like the breasts of robins," gave freely of oats, rye, buckwheat, and potatoes. Ineffaceable were the memories of this farm on the hill, memories of his father striding across the sloping fields scattering seed-grain from a bag across his body, of the cattle black against the illuminated west at early nightfall, of the snowdrifts ten or fifteen feet deep on one side of the hill while the other was swept bare, of the days in spring and fall when "the very air at times seemed suddenly to turn to pigeons," and best of all, perhaps, of the sugar-making, when the arriving robins broke the winter silence of the woods and the squirrels once more animated the trees. "Ah, I am there now! I see the woods flooded with sunlight, I smell the dry leaves, and the mould under them just quickened by the warmth; the long-trunked maples in their gray rough liveries stand thickly about; I see the brimming pans and buckets, always on the sunny side of the trees, and hear the musical dropping of the sap; the 'boiling-place,' with its delightful camp features, is just beyond the first line, with its great arch looking to the southwest."

He came to know each tree as a friend, and to mourn its loss if it died or was laid low by the axe. In the "sugar-bush" he found the only farm work that he enjoyed; he always sought an element of play in work, he confesses: "buckling down to any sort of routine always galled me, and does yet." Unlike Whittier and Muir, who accepted the toil of the farm as their natural lot, Burroughs inwardly rebelled at hoeing corn, picking stones, haying, and harvesting, and longed for Montgomery Hollow or Rose's Brook, where the fish were, or for the woods where he shot gray squirrels, partridges, and wild pigeons. We may well believe that he was, as he says, healthy and active and highly impressionable, and that the naturalist manifested itself in him, but not in his brothers, as a love of exploring the fields and woods and brooks and learning the ways of nature. He liked to watch the leaf-cutters and to follow them to their nests; he made a collection of the combs and honey of bumble-bees before he entered his teens; he spied on the evasive hylas, even capturing them and holding them till they piped sitting in his hand—a feat he was never able to repeat afterward.

Unlike his brothers, too, John Burroughs had a craving for knowledge. The local school was not enough; he would go to the Academy at Harpersfield. His father promised, and the boy, ploughing for rye, had visions of learning at the end of each furrow. But the expense proving formidable, he did not leave home till March, 1854, when he set out in a snow-squall, not to the Academy but to Tongore, in Ulster County, where he was to teach in a little school, "boarding round," a boy of seventeen "full of vague and tremulous aspirations and awakenings, but undisciplined, uninformed, with many inherited incapacities and obstacles to weigh me down." That fall, with his earnings of fifty dollars, he set out "atop a load of butter" for the Hedding Literary Institute, where he studied mathematics, chemistry, French, and logic, and parsed Milton. Picking up, about this time, two volumes of Dr. Johnson's works, he absorbed and imitated them; and he read his first novel, *Charlotte Temple,* which made him revolt against the life of the old farm. The next summer he studied languages and mathematics at Cooperstown Seminary, where he also played ball and rowed with the boys and chanced upon the writings of Emerson. The first taste of this characteristic fruit of New England he found forbidding, but the year following he returned with better success, and presently entered into the spell of his "master-enchanter," so that when he met Emerson at West Point, whom he described as an alert countryman with a silk hat too large for his head, and carried his valise to the boat-landing, he "was in the seventh heaven of delight." In Emerson, he reports, he for a time lived and moved and had his intellectual being; and it was primarily Emerson, he thinks, who transformed his instinctive love of nature into the conscious, reflective love of her that more and more dominated his life. Under the enchanter's spell he wrote an essay on "Expression" which Lowell, as editor of the *Atlantic,* suspecting it to be Emerson's, looked up in the *Dial* and elsewhere, and, not finding it, accepted and published (November, 1860). The reviewers suffered the same delusion, and the article went into *Poole's Index* as Emerson's. Alarmed by this success, as an Emersonian individualist might well be, he concluded, he says, to bury his garments in the earth, and set about to achieve a style of his own by dint of writing about sugar-making, and cows, and haying, and stone walls.

Finding Emerson, in time, "deficient in viscera," he became an early disciple of Walt Whitman, destined ever to remain a friend, a hero, and a prophet, and to give his life a spirit and substance it could scarcely have otherwise attained. His other masters, in comparison, do not count, least of all Johnson and Pope; from Arnold and Renan he derived something of the critical spirit, from Thoreau, whose *Walden* he read in his youth, a keener relish of the wild and suggestions of a technique of nature description ("but I am not conscious of any great debt to Thoreau"), from Gilbert White a better sense of the charm of the artless style and the value of the detective eye; but from none of them, nor from Emerson, did he derive so much and so variously as from Whitman. When twenty or twenty-one years old he first became acquainted with Whitman's poems, and a few years later, in the fall of 1863, he met the poet himself in Washington, where Burroughs had settled as a clerk of the treasury. The regular Sunday breakfasts, at which Whitman regularly caused Mrs. Burroughs's excellent pancakes and coffee to spoil pending his sauntering arrival, were the beginning of many years of friendship, and, on Burroughs's part, of ardent admiration. He wrote a book about him, in the conclusion of which he said: "I have accepted Whitman entire and without reservation"—the only terms on which, as it happened, Whitman allowed himself to be accepted. He accepted as final Whitman's reconciliation of self-assertion and humanitarianism; he accepted Whitman's artistic ideals, imitative of the insouciance of the animals; he accepted his religion. So far as Burroughs may be said to have attained a religion, it was essentially Whitman's; through the following sentence we may conveniently enter the inner temple of Burroughs's life:

> "The religion of a democratic and scientific era, as voiced by Whitman and as exemplified in his life, is of quite another character,—not veneration, but joy and triumph; not fear, but love; not self-abasement, but self-exaltation; not sacrifice, but service: in fact, not religion at all in the old sense of the spiritual at war with the natural, the divine with the human, this world a vale of tears, and mundane things but filth and ashes, heaven for the good and hell for the bad; but in the new sense of the divinity of all things, of the equality of gods and men, of the brotherhood of the race, of the identity of the material and the spiritual, of the beneficence of death and the perfection of the universe."

Not to all of this, however, could Burroughs well have some so early as the 'sixties; the "bucolic treasury clerk in Washington," as he styled himself later, had as yet few convictions and probably did not perceive the full significance of those he had. He was not yet the brooding observer of Slabsides, but a bread-winner and ornithologist. The really effective influence of those days, the influence that pervades his first book on nature, was not Whitman but Audubon.

If it was Emerson who gave him a new attitude toward nature and Whitman who gave him a new attitude toward all of life, it was Audubon who opened to him the delights of ornithology. Years before, while rambling with his brother in the "Deacon woods" one

Sunday, he had seen vividly, in a flash, a bird later assumed to be the blue yellow-backed warbler, and suddenly realized, as most farm boys never do, what undreamed wonders surrounded him. Still, he did nothing till the spring preceding his move to Washington, when, teaching school near West Point, he happened upon the works of Audubon. "I took fire at once. It was like bringing together fire and powder." By contagion he now felt something of the ardor of Audubon on bleak Labrador, "happier than any king ever was," or on shipboard, "nearly cured of his seasickness when a new gull appears in sight." With the help of Audubon and of a collection of mounted birds at the Academy, he took up the exploration of the newly discovered realm. Of the countless birds that the farm boy passes by nor cares to see, the first that he identified was the red-eyed vireo, plain monotonous singer of the village treetops, who so kindled his enthusiasm that before the close of the season he had named a dozen other birds, including a hooded warbler that printed its image ineffaceably on his youthful mind.

At once he was filled with a desire to communicate his delight to others. Early that same autumn he began his first ornithological paper, "The Return of the Birds," which he completed after reaching Washington. It became the first chapter of his first book (not counting his preliminary study of Whitman in 1867), *Wake-Robin,* published in 1871, a book that, despite its immaturities, has perhaps a more lasting charm than any of the long series of volumes that followed it. For the first time in his life this "home body" was far from his native woods and mountains, so far that nature wore a novel and not altogether friendly aspect, and in a city, where he confesses he never felt quite at ease. But if not entirely contented in his new environment, he had acquired a perspective and an emotional impetus that, with his fresh ornithological fervors, made possible the delightful essays that he now wrote. Seated at his desk before an iron wall, he lived over again, as he wrote, the life of his childhood and youth in the Catskill region; the mountains, the woods, the sloping farm, the home life, the adventures afield, all came back to him with a vividness they had not possessed when he was among them. He gave a chapter to the bees, one to the speckled trout, one to the strawberries, one to the bluebird, one to the birds of the hemlock forests: themes to which he returned with diminishing frequency in later volumes. If the accumulating years brought him an equanimity suited to the uses of science and philosophy, they more and more quenched the emotional buoyancy that characterizes *Wake-Robin.* The passion for home, indeed, if anything increased, but whereas in his later years it made Burroughs passively retrospective, in *Wake-Robin* and other early books it supplied the themes of his essays and suffused them with feeling.

The dominant home theme of *Wake-Robin* is indicated in the first sentence of the preface: "This is mainly a book about the Birds." Fifty years later, he was more attentive to "The Friendly Rocks" of his native countryside, and out West he stated that the rocks attracted him so much more than the birds that he had a raging "geologic fever." But the ornithological excitement with which his career began was perhaps more nearly a fever, and it certainly produced more notable results. What interested him most in ornithology, he says in the same preface, was "the pursuit, the chase, the discovery"—it was an adventure, an active, not a brooding passion like his absorption in geology, akin to his boyhood hunting and fishing and sugar-making. On the one hand his zest for life and action; on the other, the abounding life of the bird—"a bird," he wrote in one of his first books, "seems to be at the top of the scale, so vehement and intense is his life—large-brained, large-lunged, hot, ecstatic, his frame charged with buoyancy and his heart with song": like a poet, in short, or a boy. There were the pouring hosts of passenger pigeons, for instance, transforming the scene overnight: "The naked woods are suddenly blue as with fluttering ribbons and scarfs, and vocal as with the voices of children"; or, as he described them nearly a half century later, using the same images flashed upon his sensitive youthful brain, "Often late in March, or early in April, the naked beechwoods would suddenly become blue with them, and vocal with their soft, childlike calls; or all day the sky would be streaked with the long lines or dense masses of the moving armies." There was the winter wren, darting in and out of fence and brush; the loved bluebird "with the earth tinge on his breast and the sky tinge on his back" dropping out of heaven on a bright March morning, an elusive voice in the first weeks and only later the cheery caroler of the fence stake; the early robins, taking possession of field and grove, rustling the wood leaves with their whirring wings, leaping and sweeping everywhere, singing at sunset from the stark treetops a simple strain that melted the winter more effectually than the sun and the south wind; the phoebe at intervals describing an artistic ellipse in the air; the flicker—"an old favorite of my boyhood"—shouting and laughing in excess of strength; the polygamous cowbird gurgling to the delight of his mates; the skulking vesper sparrow; the field sparrow, the white-eyed vireo, the wood thrush, the hermit thrush, the veery, the catbird, the pewee, the hen-hawk. He loved them all with a poet's love of beauty and a farm-boy's affection for home; the plants rooted to the ground, the dead soil and rocks that meant chiefly hard labor, were in comparison unmeaning. Some of the happiest hours of John Burroughs's life, one may well surmise, were those in which he saw the familiar bird-life of the farm transfigured by a new enthusiasm, and described it in rambling essays in the intervals allowed by his government clerical work. How he made them live! Without literary talent of the first order, he often rivaled Thoreau in his power of interpretative description. He had keen senses, especially the sharp eyes and discriminating ear requisite in ornithology.[1] Inferior to Thoreau in literary talent, he equalled him in ocular and surpassed him in aural perceptiveness, and he exercised this perceptiveness more objectively than did Thoreau. In these matters, too, he was easily superior to the great American ornithologists themselves, including Audubon, who had a seeing eye but a dull ear. No one, certainly, has caught so surely and transcribed so adequately the forms and the qualities of bird songs.

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[1] Yet he was extraordinarily slow in identifying, for example, the singer of a flight-song he heard constantly—the ecstatic vespertine warble of the ovenbird. "For nearly two years," he says, "this strain of the pretty walker was little more than a disembodied voice to me, and I was puzzled by it as Thoreau by his mysterious night-warbler."

In recent years an unceasing effort has been made by ornithologists to describe the songs of birds with something like scientific precision; so to describe the bird itself is easy, but the song is baffling. Since few birds sing in accordance with the intervals of the diatonic scale, and few sing without using notes quite indeterminate in pitch, since, in short, birds do not use an exact musical instrument like the piano, the form of description recently in favor—the musical staff—has led to a small amount of success and a great deal of distortion and absurdity. Burroughs wisely resorted to a more fruitful means, a combination of literal transcript and interpretative description, in the manner of Thoreau. In *Wake-Robin* alone are innumerable happy examples. The harsh song of the dickcissel, one of his Washington acquaintances, he set down as: *fscp, fscp, fee fee fee.* Of the black and white warbler's song, he says, his "fine strain reminds me of hair-wire." Of the black-throated blue-back warbler:

> "Beyond the Barkpeeling, where the woods are mingled hemlock, beech, and birch, the languid midsummer note of the black-throated blue-back falls on my ear. 'Twea, twea, twea-e-e!' in the upward slide, and with the peculiar *z-ing* of summer insects, but not destitute of a certain plaintive cadence. It is one of the most languid, unhurried sounds in all the woods. I feel like reclining upon the dry leaves at once."

Of the ovenbird, renamed the teacher-bird through the following accurate description:

> "Commencing in a very low key, which makes him seem at a very uncertain distance, he grows louder and

louder till his body quakes and his chant runs into a shriek, ringing in my ear with a peculiar sharpness. This may be represented thus: 'Teacher, *teacher,* TEACHER, TEACHER, *TEACHER!*'—the accent on the first syllable and each word uttered with increased force and shrillness."

Of the vesper sparrow, the poet of the pastures:

"Go to those broad, smooth, uplying fields where the cattle and sheep are grazing, and sit down in the twilight on one of those warm, clean stones, and listen to this song. On every side, near and remote, from out the short grass which the herds are cropping, the strain rises. Two or three long, silver notes of peace and rest, ending in some subdued trills and quavers, constitute each separate song. Often you will catch only one or two of the bars, the breeze having blown the minor part away. Such unambitious, quiet, unconscious melody! It is one of the most characteristic sounds in nature. The grass, the stones, the stubble, the furrow, the quiet herds, and the warm twilight among the hills are all subtly expressed in this song; this is what they are at last capable of."

One more: the hermit thrush, whose strain, as Burroughs rightly says, is the finest sound in all nature:

"It is perhaps more of an evening than a morning hymn, though I hear it at all hours of the day. It is very simple, and I can hardly tell the secret of its charm. 'O spheral, spheral!' he seems to say; 'O holy, holy! O clear away, clear away! O clear up, clear up!' interspersed with the finest trills and the most delicate preludes. It is not a proud, gorgeous strain, like the tanager's or the grosbeak's; suggests no passion or emotion—nothing personal—but seems to be the voice of that calm, sweet solemnity one attains to in his best moments."

I have not hesitated to multiply instances, because in such writing John Burroughs is certainly at his best. Through such accurate and sympathetic description, in which, often, each word has a special service, he has given us a chorus of American singing birds unequaled in numbers and charm. There are better pages of natural description in Thoreau, but they are few. Whoever would enjoy acquaintance with our song-birds cannot afford to ignore the pages of *Wake-Robin* and some of its successors. If, as one turns the pages of the later volumes, the birds one by one lapse into silence, to give place to disquisitions on biology and the world in general, a few still sing with the old charm; the "sweet, quavering ribbon of song" that the white-throat whistles, the "fine strain, like that of some ticking insect" of the blackpoll in the spring, enliven the sluggish speculations of even so late a volume as *Field and Study*. The birds are never far away, even in the work of old age, and when they come they are sure to sing. It is curious how little description of the bird itself one finds, or of its habitual manners, how promptly he makes it give utterance. "What is a bird without its song?" he asks in *Wake-Robin*. "It seems to me that I do not know a bird till I have heard its voice; then I come nearer to it at once, and it possesses a human interest to me." At bottom, it was this human interest that he valued; not the bird itself, but its expression in another language, a musical language, a language of the poets, of human moods and aspirations. The birds gave voice to his own youthful emotions, They were himself. As they absented themselves more and more from his life, he was proportionately forsaking his own earlier and more poetic self. After *Wake-Robin,* even in *Wake-Robin,* a new John Burroughs appears. This later Burroughs is less poet than detective-naturalist.

§ 3

We have seen that Thoreau, who began like Burroughs as a poetic observer of nature, remained essentially a poetic observer all his days, despite his matter-of-fact journalizing. Burroughs did not; in him the poetic observer was early dominated by the scientific observer, by a lively curiosity with regard to the fact, like that of Gilbert White, whom he rightly set down as a type of the born observer, "the man with the detective eye." White was, indeed, one of the first of the true field naturalists; the time had gone by when a Goldsmith could be found inspecting "curious scraps of descriptions of animals scrawled upon the wall with a black lead pencil," and the time was come when a Gilbert White could be seen rambling through the beech woods and over the rolling downs with eye and ear alert to every unwonted phenomenon. Yet it was not so much the detective eye of the gentleman-naturalist of Selborne that made his book a classic, as the winning spirit of the man himself and the measured charm of his eighteenth-century style. And likewise Thoreau, who lacked "the detective eye of the great naturalist," as Burroughs remarked in an early essay, who never really perceived the goings on in the world about him, whose most unusual observation that Burroughs could recall was his discovery that the wild apple-tree outwits the browsing cattle by protecting itself with dense, thorny branchlets and sending a favored shoot up beyond their reach, who bragged that he would not go round the corner even to see the world blow up (to which Burroughs responds that *his* curiosity would certainly bring him there)—Thoreau likewise owes his place to temperamental and spiritual qualities, and not to his skill in observation. As a creator of literature, Burroughs, too, must owe what measure of success he has achieved to his literary qualities, which his detective aptitude serves while remaining distinct.

It must be remembered, however, that Burroughs did not regard himself as primarily a literary writer, but rather as a student of nature. If he has sacrificed the literary values, he has sacrificed them to an end that, through most of his life, seemed more important than they: understanding of the ways of nature. Similarly, it may be said that what represents a loss to him who reads Burroughs in the literary spirit represents a gain to him who reads him in the scientific spirit—who seeks in his pages fresh knowledge of the natural order and stimulation toward the independent pursuit of such knowledge. Most men are indeed blind to the little dramas of nature, as Burroughs never tired of pointing out; do not read the sudden signals and gestures, penetrate the screens, untangle the skeins, distinguish between the commonplace and the significant. In the book of nature, "there is coarse print and fine print; there are obscure signs and hieroglyphics. We all read the large type more or less appreciatively, but only the students and lovers of nature read the fine line and the footnotes. . . . For my part, my delight is to linger long over each page of this marvelous record, and to dwell fondly upon its most obscure text." In this study, the first thing needful is a sharp eye. I think I have seen sharply, until I am challenged, as when, says Burroughs, a lady asks me to draw an outline of the tulip-tree leaf and I realize how blurred my sight has been. Here, again, is a chickadee nest, from which the birds are absent, with apparently some hair of a small animal at the edges of the cavity in the tree—their nest has been rifled. But a microscopic examination of the hair proves it to be not hair but a vegetable fiber, which had caught at the entrance to the nest while the chickadees were drawing it in. A sharp eye first, then; and secondly, patience. It is not enough to see clearly; you must also see steadily and carefully. The error in this matter of the chickadee nest sprang not only from defective observation but also from hasty inference, as it did in the following incident. A lawyer once sent John Burroughs an egg-shell of the quail to testify that the mother bird, not the young, had broken the shells, since the edges were bent *in*. But the observer was hasty, had not considered the effect of the shrinking of the skin lining the shell; he had failed to sift all the evidence, had not cross-questioned the facts, had not applied legal methods. Legal methods, medical methods, scholarly methods—they are all alike the critical or scientific method, always a rare possession, which John Burroughs has in high degree. As he saunters across the open fields and through the woods, stopping here and there to listen more acutely or see more accurately, there is little in the drama of nature that escapes his perspicuous perception. Drama in a sense it is, and he the audience; yet, as he points out in an essay on "Hasty Observation," it is not the drama as we humanly produce it:

> "It is not like the play at the theatre, where everything is made conspicuous and aims to catch the eye, and where the story clearly and fully unfolds itself. On nature's stage many dramas are being played at once, and without any reference to the lookers-on, unless it be to escape their notice. The actors rush or strut across the stage, the curtain rises or falls, the significant thing happens, and we heed it not."

To the observer of the natural drama, to the reader in the book of nature, there is ever a new act, a new page. Now it is a yellowish-white moth mimicking the droppings of birds, or a shrike impaling a mouse on a thorn, or a vireo harassing an intruding cowbird, or a pair of eagles celebrating their nuptials in mid-air, or a chipmunk preparing his winter quarters in July, or a salamander revealing himself after years as the source of a mysterious plaintive piping in the woods of summer and autumn, or a genuine English lark showering melody over a Hudson valley meadow, or a skunk—here is the skunk story:

> "I did something the other day with a wild animal that I had never done before or seen done, though I had heard of it: I carried a live skunk by the tail, and there was 'nothing doing,' as the boys say. I did not have to bury my clothes. I knew from observation that the skunk could not use its battery with effect without throwing its tail over its back; therefore, for once at least, I had the courage of my convictions and verified the fact."

If in one season, says Burroughs, he picks up two or three facts in natural history that are new to him, he considers himself lucky; as well he might, in comparison with Thoreau's findings in twenty years of daily excursions in the country. With time, Burroughs naturally became more keen of eye and ear, more patient in drawing his conclusions. More and more, after his poetic period, his scientific observation dictated the substance and spirit of his books, from, let us say, the *Locusts and Wild Honey* of 1879 to the *Leaf and Tendril* of 1908. Repeatedly he wrote essays on "The Art of Seeing Things," "Straight Seeing and Straight Thinking," "Intensive Observation," "Hasty Observation," and "Sharp Eyes," and repeatedly exemplified his own superiority in these matters by essays made up of incidents afield, offhand experiments, rambling speculation regarding the habits of natural life and geologic phenomena. Of course, the "nature fakers" of our time disturbed him greatly, and called forth his authoritative condemnation. Of course, the great French naturalist Fabre, whose translated works appeared in Burroughs's later years, won his hearty admiration. In a chapter on "The Insect Mind" he has properly remarked that Maeterlinck's praise of Fabre as "the insects' Homer," widely quoted to-day, is aside of the mark. Fabre, says Burroughs, is not the insects' Homer but rather the insects' Sherlock Holmes. For in Fabre we find the same detective eye that Gilbert White and John Burroughs have, but concentrated to a single study, directed firmly to one definite purpose after another, and supplemented by the laboratory experimentation of his *harmas*. He was both a more systematic and a greater detective than Burroughs.

§ 4

From this period of detective observation Burroughs passed without sharp transition into a period of scientific study and speculation. The detective eye and the detective mind were not put aside—far from it; they interplay with an increasingly conscious application of scientific standards to nature and human life, and with deliberate acquisitions of knowledge in various sciences. "Study" is perhaps not the word to designate the new attitude, since Burroughts speaks of "playing the geologist and the naturalist, or half-playing them," and elsewhere of extremely offhand inquiries in astronomy, geology, botany, zoölogy, physics, chemistry, and natural history. "I do little more than graze in these fields. I select what tastes good to me. I want only the vital nourishing truths; for the hard, mechanical facts, the minute details, the thistles of technical knowledge I have little appetite. I join inquiry with meditation. I loiter about the rocks, but I carry no geologist's hammer. I observe the birds, but I take no notes. I admire the flowers, but I leave them on their stems; I have no herbarium to fill. I am curious about the insects, I consider their ways, but I make no collection."

There is nothing conciliatory in his attitude toward the scientists. "With what desperate thoroughness," he exclaims, "the new men study the birds"—and what does it all lead to? Though in his earlier years he himself employed a gun in naming the birds, he now has no use even for the notebook and the field glass. When he goes into a natural history museum, he says, he feels as if he were attending a funeral. No museums; and no laboratory: "The other day I saw a lot of college girls dissecting cats and making diagrams of the circulation and muscle-attachments," and he was shocked. "I myself," he says a little complacently, "have got along very well without" the discipline of biology. What is the use of all this dull work, destructive of love and life; what does it produce? "I fear the experimenters unduly exalt their office. The open-air naturalist arrives at most of their results, and by a much more enjoyable and picturesque route. Without all their pother and appliances and tiresome calculations," he reaches essentially the same conclusions. In a word, the exact science of our day is little more than a vast humbug: a verdict not altogether pleasing to the scientists themselves, who, by no means impressed with the results of the informal research of John Burroughs, shrug their shoulders and quietly smile. It is not a pretty spectacle. No doubt our scientists are very fussy, but their fussiness, after all, is only the pedantry that must impregnate the great mass of workers in any thriving science, and the part of wisdom is to deplore their excesses rather than to reject their labors altogether. This attitude of Burroughs is the more unfortunate when one remembers that his preoccupation through many years and books was to praise the achievements of modern science.

Burroughs the scientist manifested himself at least as early as Burroughs the poetic observer. According to Clara Barrus, the first of all his published writings was an article in the Bloomfield *Mirror* of May 13, 1856, on "Vagaries *vs.* Spiritualism," written when he was only nineteen, in his Johnsonian style, but otherwise not unlike numerous later essays, as the opening sentence will serve to indicate:

> "Mr. Mirror,—Notwithstanding the general diffusion of knowledge in the nineteenth century, it is a lamentable fact that some minds are so obscured by ignorance, or so blinded by superstition, as to rely with implicit confidence upon the validity of opinions which have no foundation in nature, or no support by the deductions of reason."

This is clearly not the mood of *Wake-Robin, Winter Sunshine, Birds and Poets,* and the other early volumes, though even in *Birds and Poets* there are pages prophetic of the later books in praise of science. But it is precisely the mood of *The Light of Day,* published many years later, with the incoming twentieth century, by which time the scientific temper of the age had completely won him. In *Pepacton* he had contrasted the protean subjectivity of the poet of nature with the exact meanings and laws achieved by the man of science, asserting that "the scientific reading or interpretation of nature is the only real one"; and in *Indoor Studies* he had mused over the austerities forced upon us by the revelations of modern science, turning us out into the cold to face "the eternities and the infinities of geologic time and sidereal space. We are no longer cozily housed in pretty little anthropomorphic views of things. . . . We feel the cosmic chill"—a passage repeated almost word for word a quarter of a century later in *Time and Change.* He himself, bravely relinquishing anthropomorphic religion and immersing himself in the cosmic chill, became "toughened and indifferent," "content to let the unseen powers go their own way with me and mine without question or distrust." *The Light of Day* is the celebration of this victory. A Thoreau in *Wake-Robin,* in *The Light of Day* he is substantially another Huxley.

The object of the book is to demonstrate that the mysteries of religion vanish before the light of day, that is, the test of reason, and that the natural order revealed by reason is universal and sufficient. On its negative side the book is so belated that the writer is really knocking down a man of straw—the authority of revealed religion had already been destroyed when Burroughs entered the lists. His success is to be attributed more to the weakness of the enemy than to his own strength, since in chapter after chapter he relies upon manifold suggestion and repeated assertion rather than upon coherent argument. Religion itself, as distinguished from orthodox religion, he permits as a vague sentiment; but he clearly does not value it in comparison with science. For in the end both religion and science reach the same goal, God; and science by the surer path. "Think you the man of science does not also find God? that Huxley and Darwin and Tyndall do not find God, though they may hesitate to use that name? Whoever finds truth finds God, does he not? whoever loves truth loves God?" It is well that this somewhat naïve assertion is put interrogatively, for it has now become abundantly certain that the spiritual dilemma of the modern world will not be settled by an identification of religion and science. This pæan for science has but a rudely festive air. The dirge for literature and religion that also runs through the book like a motif is premature. Literature and religion are on the wane, but science is young, is "now probably only in the heat of its forenoon work." The future belongs to science. Yet, somewhat oddly, he goes on to assert that four fifths of life lies quite outside the domain of science; "four fifths of life is sentiment." The great ages of civilization, the great literatures, he reminds us, belong to sentiment, to patriotism, love, benevolence, admiration, worship. Although there is nothing in the Sermon on the Mount, he remarks, that appeals to our reasoning faculties, we must value it highly. Is there not a lurking paradox here, in this celebration of science as the lord of the future and its relegation to a realm covering only one fifth of life? Would not John Burroughs have done better to devote himself more often, in his writings and in his mode of life, to the realities of the preponderating "sentiment," instead of regarding himself as the champion of the scientific spirit, which is the "only" real interpreter of nature?

§ 5

The scientific enthusiasm of *The Light of Day* could not last. Long before this book was published, Burroughs had insisted upon "love" as the motivating power behind the scientific study of the universe; and even in his praise of reason as the light of day banishing the mists of superstition, even in his cordial welcoming of the young giant to whom the future belongs, there were overtones of dissatisfaction and rebellion that were later to become the dominant theme. *The Light of Day* was no sooner published than it was outgrown. Thirteen years later, when the shadows of a long life were deepening apace, the ambitious young giant of the modern world seemed to possess sinister as well as creative forces. Science was now conceived, not as in the heat of his morning labors, but as having reached the meridian. "In the Noon of Science" (*The Summit of the Years,* 1913) expresses a grudging acceptance of the achievements of natural science, and even more, disillusion as to its value in interpreting life. The author has passed from the blithe assumption: "Think you the man of science does not also find God?" to the patronizing reminder: "Let us give physical science its due." The militant intellectualism of Huxley has lapsed into the melancholy and the recurring bewilderment of the finer spirits of our epoch; "I too," says Burroughs, "at times feel the weary weight of the material universe as it presses upon us in a hundred ways in our mechanical and scientific age." Looking down from the summit of the years he perceives that knowledge comes but wisdom lingers—that railroad, automobile, and aëroplane have not brought the arch-gods in place of the half-gods; that our mastery of the forces of nature has all but led to their mastery of us (allusively quoting Emerson, he sees now, he says, that "we cannot vault into the saddle of the elemental forces and ride them and escape the danger of being ridden by them"); that the finer qualities of the civilization of the Old World are a legacy from the pre-scientific age; that the scientific age when only slightly unchecked, as here in the New World, has produced a civilization "the ugliest and most materialistic that any country or age ever saw"; that in the most pretentious researches of science, those into the nature of life and consciousness, which it has sought to explain in terms of physics and chemistry, scientific investigation is "at the end of its tether"; that whereas material or logical truths are intellectually discerned, spiritual truths are spiritually discerned—"All questions that pertain to the world within us are beyond the reach of science." For all these facts, pointed out with salutary emphasis, science is not responsible, says Burroughs, but man himself: a truth to be remembered in our reaction against natural science. Surely science cannot be other than altogether beneficent when beneficently used. But it must be used to serve, not to domineer, the spiritual values of life. "Where there is no vision," says Burroughs, "no intuitive perception of the great fundamental truths of the inner spiritual world, science will not save us. In such a case our civilization is like an engine running without a headlight."

No, the physical light of day cannot illuminate the profound inner being of man; it leaves it dark as the darkest night. Illumination, at best a glimmering illumination, is obtainable only through the searching light of the spirit. "We must transcend physical science to reach the spiritual and grasp the final mystery of life." Science finds no meaning in such pregnant utterances as Goethe's "There is a universe within thee as well," or Christ's "The kingdom of heaven is within you." Science may help us endlessly in understanding our physical life and enhancing our well being, but it cannot help us in understanding our souls—"we must look to the great teachers and prophets, poets and mystics."

In a sense, this is not a new conclusion in Burroughs's work; the distinction, though blurred, is already present in *The Light of Day.* What is new is the application of the distinction. Formerly, Burroughs had looked to certain poets, chief of all Whitman, for help in understanding the soul; yet, with his scientific temper, he could not be convinced of anything like *authority* in Whitman. His feelings responded, rather than his mind, and the mind, with Burroughs, whatever he may say, is central. So, despite Whitman's influence, he had continued to think in terms of natural science. But in his later work, beginning with *Time and Change,* he found, or believed that he had found, the authority wanting in the poets, the ground for accepting the validity of intuitive rather than scientific perception. The rapture of science, a tame equivalent for the French Revolution that made it bliss for democratic poets to be alive, had passed into something not far from disillusion, when M. Bergson, student of science and technical philosopher, no mere *littérateur* dallying with the emotions, swam into his ken and gave to Burroughs's secret tendencies a sanction altogether unlooked for. What he had wanted to believe, he now found it possible to believe. He came under the spell of Bergson, according to Miss Barrus, in the summer of 1911; and in the four volumes immediately succeeding, Bergson's influence is fundamental (*Time and Change,* 1912, *The Summit of the Years,* 1913, *The Breath of Life,* 1915, *Under the Apple-Trees,* 1916). While the scientists in the main have denounced Bergson, John Burroughs became his disciple; the Huxley of *The Light of Day* became the Bergson of *The Summit of the Years.* Bergson is the great reconciler; in him literature, science, and philosophy are no longer separate approaches to reality, but one. Whereas Herbert Spencer saw everything in the light of science alone, Henri Bergson envisages life in the light that never was on sea or land. He likewise goes beyond the far-seeing Emerson, in being "the friend and aider of those who would see with the spirit and enter into the mystery of creation through intellectual sympathy and intuition, instead of making the vain attempt to do so through the logical and scientific understanding." He transforms the mirage of most of the spiritual strivings of the past into reality, permits the man of science (me, John Burroughs), without ceasing to be a man of science, to retain such words as "soul," "spirit," "creation," and "spontaneity" "as standing for real truths in the total scheme of things." He gives the dignity of science to spiritual perception.

On these terms Burroughs is content to follow Bergson in his degradation of the intellect, accepting his assertion, along with the italics, that *"the intellect is characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life."* The intellect may, indeed, comprehend the physical order, by which it has been formed, but never the vital order. Life itself, the vital order, can be grasped only through intuition, through sympathetic immersion in pure duration. By projecting ourselves within life, "we shall escape from the bondage of the mechanistic view into the freedom of the larger truth of the ceaseless creative view; we shall see the unity of the creative impulse which is immanent in life and which, 'passing through generations, links individuals with individuals, species with species, and makes of the whole series of the living one immense wave flowing over matter.'" Here at last, thinks John Burroughs, is a conception of the four fifths of life outside of science which a modern man may accept. And he may accept it with joy. Bergson exhilarates like a bath or a long walk. He shows—does he not?—that all life is divine, that matter is spiritualized, as Whitman had asserted long before. After Bergson we are free, as we were not quite free after Whitman, to live in the certainty of the immanence of spirit in nature, mingling with it in joyous company, knowing the soil and the spaces of the sky friendly not chilly, gazing back fearlessly down the long road by which man has ascended past all the perils of geologic time, wondering ecstatically at the miracle of the creative process as it lurches forward without a goal. Remote indeed, now, is the thoughtless ornithological ardor of *Wake-Robin;* remote the keen zest for a detective understanding of nature functioning; remote, even, the geologic and biologic studies once so absorbing. Something of each remains, of course, partly because old age is retrospective, and the sugar-bush of the farm and the first hooded warbler in the woods will never be effaced, and the landscape of the old days necessarily wears a new aspect after years of brooding over its geology and biology; yet, as Burroughs says in *Field and Study,* "when I take a walk now, thoughts of natural history play only a secondary part; I suspect it is more to bathe the spirit in natural influences than to store the mind with natural facts." More and more, as he mused on the vital order, the physical fact yielded less pleasure and meaning, while the inner fact, the vital impulse expressing itself in a stream of novelties, fascinated him. As a boy on the farm, he turned eagerly, as we have seen, from the human world of work and character to the influences of an infinitely curious and beautiful outer nature; and as an old man, he was still immersed in these influences. They were richer, as the man was richer, but they still proceeded from the enchantments of outer nature rather than from the inner life of the spirit.

§ 6

If the two, nature and spirit, are indeed one, as Burroughs believed, there was a genuine advance in his career from poetic observation to scientific study to spiritual insight. But the spiritual insight of Burroughs is clearly not that of the sages, his own Emerson included, who have invariably assumed a dualism that he denies. Science, according to Burroughs, has rendered impossible the conception of any sort of dualism in creation: "when the man of science seeks to understand and explain the world in which we live, he guards against seeing double, or seeing two worlds instead of one, as our unscientific fathers did—an immaterial or spiritual world surrounding and interpenetrating the physical world, or the supernatural enveloping and directing the natural." He is at a loss, he admits naïvely, to account for this "mythopoetic tendency" of our unscientific fathers, unless, perchance, it served a good purpose, along with indubitably bad effects, in the evolution of mankind. But he has no doubt that it is high time that we discard the superstitions of dualism, since "hedge or qualify as we will, man is a part of Nature. . . . Can there be anything in the universe that is not of the universe? Can we make two or three out of the one?" It will not serve to remind Burroughs, who respects the natural but not the human past, that Jesus did so, that Plato and Aristotle did so, that Dante and Milton did so, that all the wise men in the history of mankind have done so, basing their conviction on the very nature of consciousness itself; for Burroughs will answer that science has now shown that consciousness itself has a "physiological origin," "that the spiritual has its root in the carnal." Somewhere on the long road, he says picturesquely, man picked up his brain, and somewhere, later, he developed his ethical system. We shall look in vain in nature, not only for reason and holiness, but also for our ethical principles; she is non-moral, her needs are all physical; while we have her curiosity, jealousy, sex love, fear, etc., she knows nothing of our "exclusively human" emotions and impulses such as awe, veneration, humility, self-sacrifice, shame, and modesty. These human properties began "*de novo* in him only as the wing began *de novo* in the bird, or the color began *de novo* in the flower," and were built up by men through the contacts of society. "They are the fruit of the social aggregate."

Yet the scientific attitude that forbids our seeing double results, as Burroughs himself confesses, in fundamental contradictions. "I am aware," he says, "that two ideas, or principles, struggle in my mind for mastery. One is the idea of the super-mechanical and the super-chemical character of living things; the other is the supremacy and universality of what we call natural law." The supernatural point of view springs from his "literary habit of mind"; the natural, from his "scientific bent." Hence the reader is to expect "obvious contradictions." And he will find them. On the one hand Burroughs asserts that nature is simply man viewed externally, that we may come to know ourselves through a study of her; on the other, that we have exclusively human traits of the highest importance which cannot be studied in her. On the one hand he regards these peculiarly human traits as the most valuable possessions of humanity, and on the other is well pleased, with Wordsworth (whom he quotes),

> " . . . to recognize
> *In nature* and the language of the sense,
> The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
> The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
> Of all my *moral* being."

On the one hand he insists upon nature and spirit as an inalienable unity, rejecting the reality of dualism, and on the other complacently "lives in *two separate* compartments of his being at different times." Nor are these to be regarded as verbal or superficial contradictions, as a concrete instance will show: Burroughs's conception of the great war of 1914. War itself, we may note in passing, he views as a beneficent institution ("There must be something that vastly more than offsets the brutal element in it"), while believing also that it is a maleficent institution that the scientific spirit will eventually exorcise. In the great war Germany, who had led the rest of the world in our modern cultivation of science "as if it were our salvation," found that "the gods of science" were on her side. Did this fact place Burroughs too on her side? Not in the least; it only made him fear deeply that she would win and impose a Germanized world upon us, and it did not prevent his warm advocacy of the cause of the Allies, who had "the gods of the moral law" on their side, on the surprising ground that "our blended inheritance from Greece and Judea and the meditative

Orient" was at stake—"the spirit that begat literature, poesy, art, music." The modern Germany of science, of vital impulse, and grandiose idealism, though it is the state that his thinking leads to, is after all not the state that Burroughs wants. In the hour of crisis, he rallies to the defense of the dualistic, humanistic tradition of the Orient and the Mediterranean, to which, in his mode of life and his writings, he has given scant attention and praise. The votary of the gods of science is at heart, with all the sages, a worshiper of the gods of the moral law. He finds that he must distinguish in practice, if not in theory, between nature and man.

In theory, however, he returns on every page to the irrefragable unity of things, and to the bland optimism that accompanies this conception whenever it is emphasized. "It is the best possible world." He is in love with it, aye, with "its storms and earthquakes, its wars, its famines, and contagious diseases." Man is a mere speck, presently to be wiped out when the stars cool off; he is only "the insect of a summer hour"; he is brother to the apples that nature drops from the tree in the process of thinning—we, the dropped apples, must think of the tree, and be happy. Only so shall we enter fully into the wonder of life. The wonder! —here perhaps we have the key to the emotional compartment of John Burroughs. It is all so curious, so endlessly curious, this world we happen to find ourselves in. What we learn, far from diminishing its curiosity, but adds to it more and more. The doctrine of evolution, instead of undermining the wonder and mystery of life, has increased it immeasurably. So much to learn, so much to enjoy—how could one wish for a better world? Study the wing of a butterfly, the habits of the chipmunk, the long road of the past up which they have marched as man has marched: are greater wonders conceivable? "Transport yourself in imagination away from the earth to the vacancy of the interstellar regions. Can you convince yourself that there would be no over and no under, no east and no west, no north and no south?" "If one rode upon a meteorite rushing toward the earth, would one have the sensation of falling?" Is there no cause in these things, in all things, for infinite wonder? Pitiable indeed is the state of the man who was not endowed with the faculty of wonder or whose sense of wonder has been blunted by use. "I think I was born under happy stars, with a keen sense of wonder, which has never left me, and which only becomes jaded a little now and then." As one might expect, the wonder of a scientific temper like that of Burroughs leads from the present to the past rather than to the future. The future a Bergsonian must regard as completely unknowable; but if nothing may be predicted, much may be recollected. "As life nears its end with me," writes Burroughs in *The Breath of Life,* "I find myself meditating more and more upon the mystery of its nature and origin." Not man as he is, still less man as he might be, is the subject of scientific wonder, but man as he was when he was not man at all. Nothing can be more wonderful, to such a man, than to turn the ancient soil with a spade and lay bare the geologic ages—an abyss opens up that is indeed calculated to swallow his "identity," and everything else. If wonder and religion are the same, as Burroughs assumes; if an intellectually imaginative response to nature carried to the point of an emotional self-annihilation is spirituality, then unquestionably John Burroughs is to be ranked among the major prophets of the soul.[1]

§ 7

From the above analysis of dualistic tendencies in Burroughs, it should be obvious that the side of man that craves relation with an unchanging reality is very inadequately represented, and that the side that sympathizes with the flux of things and seeks to give scientific order to the flux is dominant. The Bergsonian philosophy in which his emotional and intellectual life culminates is a compromise between the two sides that in effect amounts to a surrender of the gods of the moral law to the gods of science, a surrender of the human to the natural. And when we turn from the philosophy of Burroughs to his personal qualities, we find an equivalent surrender.

His scientific qualities are plainly primary; his moral, secondary. "I see that I carry the instinct of the naturalist," he observes, "into all my activities. . . . I undoubtedly lack the heroic fiber. My edge is much easier turned than was that, say, of Thoreau. Austerity would ill become me. You would see through the disguise. Yes, there is much soft rock in my make-up. Is that why I shrink from the wear and tear of the world?" It is surprising but true that as a youth he once "went forward" at a religious revival; but the promised results failed to accrue, and nowhere else in his life does he show that the deeps of his inner being were stirred. "I was never a fighter; I fear that at times I may have been a shirker"—perhaps an allusion, among other things, to the war of his early manhood, when he "missed being a soldier in the armies of the Union during the Civil War, which was probably the greatest miss of my life." He always disliked anything like a fight, any contest, competition, or storm, finding his strength, rather, in his calm and sunshine. Though gifted with intellectual courage, he confesses freely his lack of moral courage: "My moral fiber is soft compared with my intellectual." In all his life one will look in vain for strenuosity of any kind; even in the intellectual domain he sought to conquer by peaceful penetration rather than by work, absorbing, not acquiring, justifying his attitude fatalistically: "I have gravitated naturally to the things that were mine," or, in homelier phrase, "Everything that interests me will stick to me like a burr." Somewhat smugly he convinced himself that the unliterary environment in which he grew without notably outgrowing it "has doubtless been best suited to me," and even from the summit of the years he remained unpersuaded that his fragmentary discipline in school was to be regretted, for though some training in science might have been a gain, the dissection of the poets, not to say the cats of the biological laboratory, he happily avoided. In social life, following his impulses, he shunned contact with men: "I am not a bit gregarious. . . . Put me with a lot of men, and we naturally separate as oil and water separate." Unlike his masters Emerson and Whitman, he had no interest in "average" unredeemed humanity, though he was more at home with women than with men. "Do you see why men do not, as a rule, care for me, and why women do?" In the larger social groups he had likewise no interest—no national pride, no state pride, no country or town pride, no neighborhood pride; but, his days having been bound each to each in a more natural piety, he abounded in "family or tribal affection."

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[1] In a late essay, "The Faith of a Naturalist," the author asserts that, amid the decay of creeds, the love of nature has preserved the old religious values, redeeming men from Mammon, frivolity, and insincerity, and making their lives "placid and sweet." The facts are highly questionable; but even if they were not, one might well be skeptical of a faith that makes for placidity rather than serenity.

Physically abstemious like Thoreau, he had none of the hardihood of Thoreau or of Muir. Clara Barrus tells us that he was highly dependent on sleep and food in order to do his work or enjoy himself, and goes on to relate how, when Muir and Burroughs and their party arrived in the Grand Canyon in the morning, Mr. Burroughs was for eating first, while Mr. Muir jeered and, waving toward the rose-purple sublimities, cried, "There! Empty your heads of all vanity, and look!" At times Burroughs has recognized the penalties of a soft fiber, as when, in an essay on "The Secret of Happiness," he concluded that happiness is secured by work: "Oh, the blessedness of work, of life-giving and life-sustaining work!"

> "I speak from experience. A few years ago I found that my life was beginning to stagnate; I discovered that I was losing my interest in things. I was out of sorts both physically and mentally; sleep was poor, digestion was poor, and my days began to wear too somber a tinge. There was no good reason for it that I could perceive except that I was not well and fully occupied. I had too much leisure."

So he bought some of a neighbor's acres, and planted a vineyard, and daily improved in health and spirits.

The philosophy of absorption he had found deficient in the physical order, and had sought a physical remedy. He did not surmise, apparently, that it may be deficient in the spiritual order likewise, and may need a spiritual or ethical remedy. Had he read his Emerson to advantage, he would have apprehended that the secret of happiness is not physical work but spiritual and ethical work, that the highest happiness is secured by the *effort* to absorb spirit, and that effective absorption in turn hinges upon the *effort* to attain virtue. Work in the vineyard renewed his physical tone and restored his characteristic placidity, but it could not satisfy that deeper "hunger of the imagination," mentioned at the beginning of this study, which one perceives beneath all the optimism of his writings. "The soul's thirst can never be slaked"—is that the language of the true prophet, the bearer of a spiritual message? At bottom the curious nostalgia, almost a disease, as Burroughs says, to which he was subject throughout his later life, was a longing, not for home, but for spiritual attainment; but, dedicated past recall to the standards of nature, he had never seriously undertaken the labors of self-conquest, through which alone the thirst of the soul can be slaked.

The result of this temperamental laxity is written large in his many books. They are rudderless. Even in a book of science, *The Breath of Life,* he is content to let his "mind drift as upon a shoreless sea." He wrote more than twenty volumes without ever thinking through his subject, or outlining it in his mind or on paper. He calls himself candidly "an extemporaneous writer," to whom writing is like fishing or hunting or sifting the sand—the gold or the game surprises him as well as the reader. "All I want," he says, "is a certain feeling, a bit of leaven, which I seem to refer to some place in my chest." Even the English essayists, Lamb and Hazlitt and Stevenson, appear to have done more than this; or, if they did not, they sought gold and game in regions so rich that the method sufficed. But in the writings of Burroughs we are given not only the gold but much of the sand—here and there a striking idea or figure, and all the rest repetition or platitude. The writings of Burroughs are akin to the *Journal* of Thoreau; he never wrote a *Walden*. His substance commonly wants variety and importance; his style, progress and emphasis. Any style, he says, quoting Voltaire, is good if it is not monotonous, but he never acted upon this valuable suggestion. As a boy waking to the delights of reading, he was attracted chiefly by essays, and he himself never wrote anything else, save a few poems. Instead of bracing himself to the task of writing a well-organized book, he always wrote unrelated informal essays, or formless essays, sometimes only fragments a page or two long, because they accorded with his moral and mental limitations.

Yet he grasped firmly one of the great truths of the romantic era in which he lived: he saw that there could be no success without sincerity. He quotes Carlyle's saying that to be original is to be sincere, and previously, in Emerson and Whitman, he had found the same doctrine. It is true that his complacency led to egotism, and his egotism to a tendency to the oracular (symbolized by the "yea" used increasingly from *Locusts and Wild Honey* onward); but it would not be excessive to say that he never wrote a word that was deliberately insincere. His moral truth is the counterpart of his intellectual honesty. He worked himself away from his masters early, and hammered out a style that is unmistakably his own. If he imitated at all, he imitated not other makers of literature but nature herself. More than once he quotes Whitman's naturalistic description of high art: "To speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movement of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside, is the flawless triumph of art." This was his stylistic creed. If his short, leisurely sentences and loose rhythms carry no suggestion of the grandeurs of the horizon, the sea, and the starry movements, they are at all events intimate with the slow animals and the manifold detail of the grass. He is a natural writer; and perhaps he himself would have asked no higher praise.

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